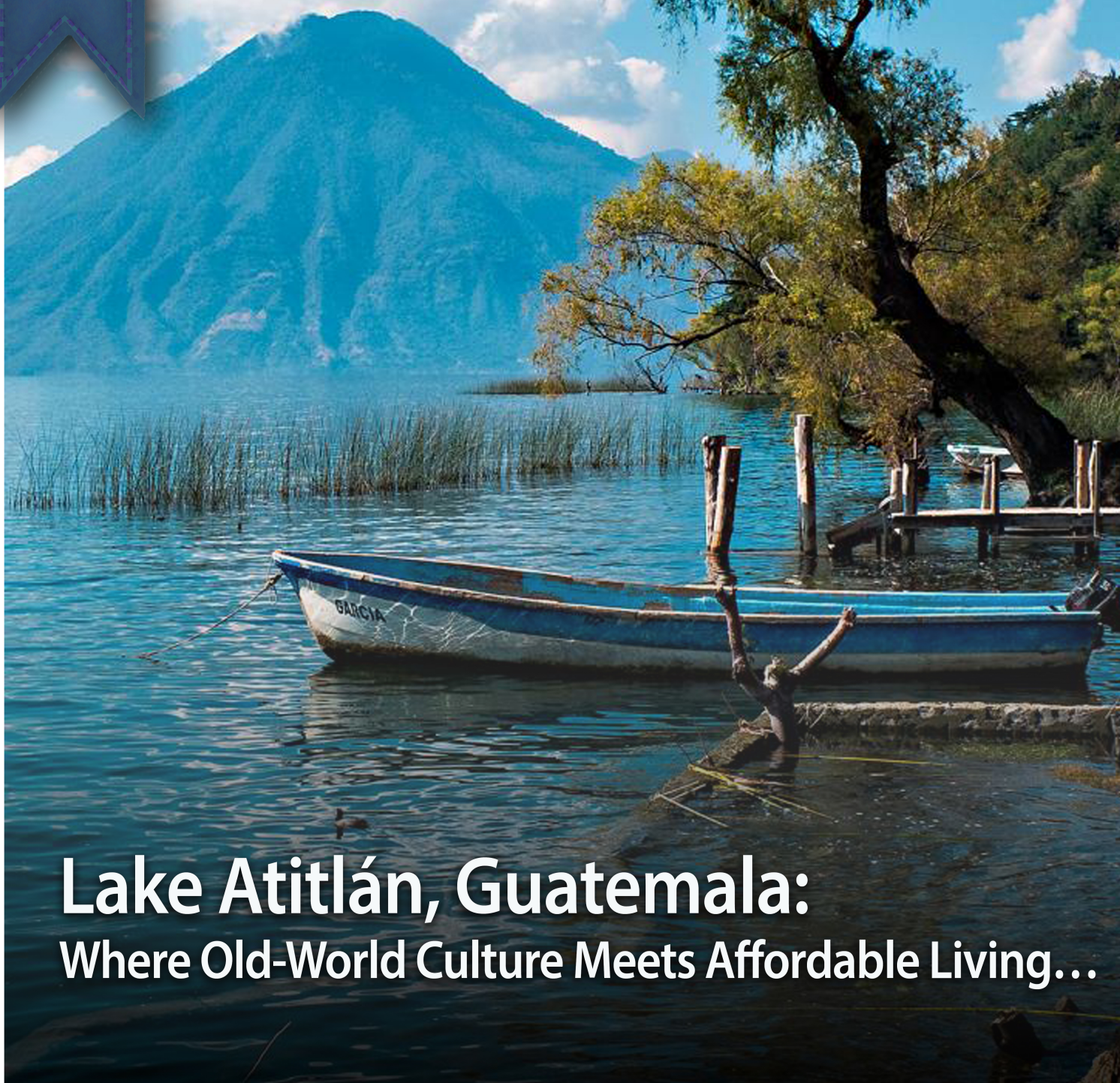




# OVERSEAS

## Haven Report



**Lake Atitlán, Guatemala:**  
**Where Old-World Culture Meets Affordable Living...**





## Retire To The Most Beautiful Lake On Earth

By Mike Anderson

The caldera created by the massive volcanic explosion, one of the strongest explosions in earth's history, formed the basin for the evolution of what is arguably the most beautiful lake in the world, Lake Atitlán in Guatemala. Beautiful by day and stunning at sunrise and sunset, with near perfect climate, easy access to North America, moderate cost of living, and reasonable access to healthcare, for the adventurous eco- and nature-lover, this could be the ideal home.

Indeed, Lake Atitlán has just become my second home, cleverly disguised as a 45-foot motor launch. After all,

if you're going to live on a scenic lake surrounded by 12 distinct indigenous villages, why not live on all of it? Having lived in Guatemala 35 years ago for five years, and being married to my *Guatemalteca*, I decided to put boots-on-the-ground once again in Guatemala. After enjoying three months of visits to indigenous villages, browsing through hand-woven textiles and other handcrafts, swimming, kayaking, hiking, horseback riding, and making new Guatemalan and expat friends, I realized that Guatemala was calling me back, and I jumped at the chance to purchase an old cargo boat for conversion into a live-aboard.

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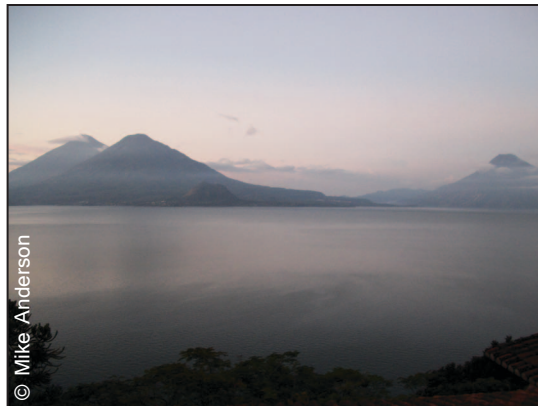
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Live and Invest  
**OVERSEAS**



If the natural attractions of the lake were not enough to remind me daily that I've made the best possible decision, I've met the most interesting group of ex-pats and locals, the kind whose life stories push you back in your seats. Throughout this *Overseas Retirement Letter* report, I write about some of those expats I met: Leo and Susan, who spend six months each year at the lake, and six months traveling through the USA and Europe; Sid and Jan, who are building an assisted living community in



The three volcanoes at sunrise



San Marcos indigenous women

### Location and Topography

Lake Atitlán is easily reached, on good roads, from Guatemala City (two and a half hours to the east) and Escuintla (two hours to the southeast). Guatemala City has an international airport serving several carriers flying in from North America. The northern highway running through Quetzaltenango and

Panajachel for expats who want to keep their aging parents close by; Dave and Deedle, owners of a hotel, diving center, and community hub in Santa Cruz La Laguna; David, owner of a popular hotel and restaurant in Santiago Atitlán; and Richard, author of three books on Lake Atitlán. In many of the villages I visited, the sense of expat community was tremendous. I had never imagined that such a diverse group of individualistic, eccentric, hard-nosed and New Age folks could generate such a strong sense of community.

And then there's the lakeside *Guatemaltecos*, direct descendants of the Mayas discovered and conquered by the Spanish conquistadores in the 16th century. The Kaqchikel people, on the north north-east side, and Tz'utujil, on the south south-west shores, exhibit more than just different languages. Their differences in traditional dress and temperament are discernible to the careful observer, and their differences from the foreign visitors are vast. Longtime residents in Panajachel village, Leo and Susan elucidate: "They have an inner tranquility and patience...we can learn a lot from them."





San Marcos to the Mexican border town of Tapachula and the far northern highway through Huehuetenango to the Mexican border crossing at La Mesilla are also good roads.

The southern highway west of Esquintla to Tapachula was severely damaged by tropical storms in 2011 and should be avoided.

Lake Atitlán was formed by several enormous volcanic explosions beginning about 14 million years ago. The last explosion that created the lake's current topography occurred about 85,000 years ago. When the central core of the volcano collapsed, the caldera that formed became the lake's basin. Subsequent volcanic activity produced the three large volcanoes on the south side:

- The **Volcán Tolimán**: 3,158 meters (10,361 ft) high; a dormant stratovolcano east of Santiago Atitlán Bay and village. A small lava dome, *Cerro de Oro*, visible on the volcano's north-eastern flank, may have formed just a few thousand years ago.
- The **Volcán Atitlán**: 3,537 meters (11,604 ft) high; an active stratovolcano south of volcano Tolimán and away from the lake's shores. This volcano recorded many eruptions between 1469 and its last eruption in 1853.
- The **Volcán San Pedro**: 3020 meters (9,908 ft) high; a dormant stratovolcano west of the other two volcanoes, with the village of San Pedro La Laguna at its base.



The lake and its villages

The lake's shoreline is about 11 miles long, encircling roughly 130 square kilometers (95 square miles) of water. Average

water depth is close to 220 meters (720 feet) with a maximum depth of about 340 meters (1,100 feet) - making it the deepest lake in Central America. Parts of the north shore have sharp escarpments dropping down 200-300 meters. The lake is fed by several small rivers but has no natural outlet, so the water level rises and falls according to yearly rainfall and evaporation. Human settlements have been discovered by divers at a depth of 25 meters.

In the last few years, the rains, brought by tropical storms and hurricanes, have raised the water level by several meters. Some water does escape the lake by underground fissures feeding rivers on the south-east corner, but the rains easily overwhelm this leakage. The water quality is good; most of the lake is crystal-clear and, until recent years, was drinking quality, away from the villages along the shore. In recent years, the lake has experienced severe seasonal blooms of blue-green algae, (*cyanobacteria*), caused by phosphate and organic waste which, according to indigenous residents, comes primarily from the Panajachel area.



Lake view from San Marcos La Laguna

## A Near Perfect Climate

Lake Atitlán is often called the "land of eternal spring" for good reason. Its southern latitude (14° 41' 0") ensures warm winters and its altitude (1,562 meters/5,125 ft) cool summers. The average temperature range in January, the coldest month, is 54F – 73F (12°C-23°C). The warmest month, May (before the

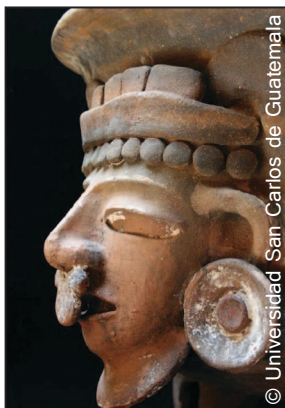


rainy season starts), ranges from a 61F to 79F (16°C-26°C) average with afternoons in the low 80s (high 20s), although it feels warmer out in the bright sun. If you enjoy being outdoors, you'll need a sun hat year round.

The moderate temperature variation means there is no distinct winter and summer seasons. Instead, the lake has an intense rainy season, mid-May to mid-October, and a dryer season, mid-October to mid-May. The rains during the rainy season tend to be long and hard; the months of June and September average 21 rainy days. The dryer months average four to five rainy days per month. Relative humidity over the year ranges from 65% to 82%. Locally, the rainy season is called "winter," and the dryer season "summer."

The lake area is windy at times and there are strong gusts in December and January. A south-to-north wind, the *xocomil*, occurs most days late morning and early afternoons, raising small chop on the lake. The less frequent north-to-south winds create waves that make the water-taxi rides quite bumpy (but never risky). The water is generally very smooth in early mornings and late evenings, the best times for kayaking and leisure boating.

## A Turbulent History Pre-Mayan and Mayan Culture



Lake Atitlán pre-Columbian ceramic artifact

Archeological evidence shows that humans settled in the Guatemala area as early as 12,000 BC. The west-central highlands, where Lake Atitlán is located, show human traces back to about 6,500 BC in the Quiché region. The lake has two underwater archeological sites dated between 600 BC and 250 AD. However, the real hub of these ancient indigenous people formed earlier (2,000 BC to 250 AD) in the Guatemalan Petén area around El Mirador, a

barely accessible area north of the ruins of Tikal. Up to about 900 AD, the Mayas flourished and built their great cities and civilization in a vast area that extended as far north as the Mexican Yucatán, and south into present day Honduras, but concentrated in the Guatemalan Petén.

This magnificent kingdom collapsed for unknown reasons around 900 AD, and the Mayas dispersed, breaking into smaller kingdoms including the K'iche', Kaqchikel, Tz'utujil, and Mam who all drifted into the present day western and central highlands of Guatemala.

The oral history of the Kaqchikel group (for more in depth information see the manuscript *Annals of the Kaqchikels*) indicates that the first appearance of the Mayas in the Lake Atitlán region dates to the 15th century. The migrating K'iche' people first entered the western highlands of Guatemala around the 12th century, subsequently leading to the establishment of Mayan kingdoms in the Lake Atitlán region. Descendants of the K'iche' and the Kaqchikel group, populated the northern and eastern sides of the lake, while the Tz'utujil group inhabited the western and southern sides. Despite their common heritage, these two groups did not co-habit the lake area peacefully, fighting frequently over territory.



Colonial church in San Pedro La Laguna

## The Colonial Period And Post Independence

The Spanish began their military conquest of Guatemala in 1519, bringing with them diseases that devastated the indigenous populations. In the Lake Atitlán area, the Spanish conquerors exploited the enmity between the Tz'utujil and Kaqchikel groups, joining with the Kaqchikels to defeat the Tz'utujil tribes in Panajachel, then turned on the Kaqchikel tribes around 1540 when the Kaqchikels refused to pay tribute. Guatemala was part of the Captaincy General of Spain that



extended from southern Mexico to Costa Rica during the colonial period. Its exports to Spain were agricultural and raw resources, of secondary importance to the “mother” country. Over-generalizing somewhat, after independence from Spain in 1821 Guatemala was ruled by a series of ineffective or corrupt dictators who exploited the indigenous peoples, expropriated their lands, and forced them into subsistence labor until the early 80s and the start of the Guatemalan civil war.

## The Civil War And Its Aftermath

Lake Atitlán is populated primarily by indigenous people; the Guatemalan military assumed that these long-suffering folks supported the guerillas fighting against the government. Human rights abuses, massacres, and disappearances were common around the lake (and elsewhere in Guatemala) until international pressure forced a peace settlement in 1996. Since then, elections have been tolerably democratic and free of violence, although the quality of governance has been erratic.

## Lake Atitlán Today



Northeast corner of Lake Atitlán

Tourism, fishing, coffee, and agriculture are the economic activities that support the majority of the villages around the lake. As the area becomes more popular with Guatemalans and foreigners, construction of new homes and the occasional hotel bring outside money to the area.

The dry season, mid-October through mid-May is peak season for foreign tourists at the lake; they come and go by the hundreds each day. The tourists come from all countries, lots of Europeans, now fewer North Americans. Guatemalans visit the lake on weekends and holidays. Educational tourism (to Spanish-language schools) attracts longer-term visitors who

make a bigger economic impact through hotel stays, meals, and indirect employment. Remittances from Guatemalans living outside of Guatemala (it's estimated that 1.5 million Guatemalans live in the USA) constitute 12% of the GDP of Guatemala, and Lake Atitlán shares proportionally in that revenue. Of the remittances received, 50% is spent for daily consumption and housing (including house construction), 20% to install businesses, 10% for savings, 8% towards healthcare, and 6% on education.



Corn is grown between houses

Agricultural production is primarily coffee and corn, a large variety of farm crops, and poultry. A stroll through the market reveals locally grown crops including: cabbages, beans, tomatoes, avocados, carrots, onions, green peppers, beets, cucumbers, green beans, squash, radishes, new potatoes, and broccoli. Fish production from the lake is small, and most of the fish is consumed at the lake or by nearby villages.



Fisherman in a *cayuco*

The water level of the lake has varied considerably over time. In 1976, an earthquake fractured the lake bed, which caused the water level to drop two meters within just a few weeks. Within the past few years, it has risen between two to three meters, and several lake-edge houses, buildings and piers have been





Water taxis line up for passengers

destroyed. The cause of the rise in the water level was the heavy rains from hurricane Stan in 2005, and tropical storms in 2010 and 2011. The flooding from these storms also washed out many roads and some villages around the lake. No new highways are currently planned for the Lake Atitlán area, as the government has barely been able to maintain existing roads.

## Getting Across The Lake

The north, west, and south sides of the lake have an excellent water taxi (launch) service. From Panajachel, direct launches leave frequently to San Pedro La Laguna and Santiago Atitlán. The local launches leave every 20 to 30 minutes with stops at Santa Cruz La Laguna, Jaibalito, Tzununá, San Marcos La Laguna, San Pablo La Laguna, San Juan La Laguna, and San Pedro La Laguna. The return trip is on the same interval. From San Pedro la Laguna, there is direct service to Santiago Atitlán, about every hour. (Details of inter-village transport are given [here in the "Lake Atitlán Village Survey."](#))

On the east side of the lake, the villages of Santa Caterina Palopó, San Antonio Palopó, and San Lucas Tolimán are served from Panajachel by bus, tuk-tuk, and passenger pickup trucks. San Lucas Tolimán has bus service and passenger pickup from Santiago Atitlán, and launch service from San Antonio Palopó.

## A Sweet Price To Pay

Launch service is provided by four co-ops that effectively have a monopoly on the service; they impose a discriminatory, three-tier pricing system, based on race and national origin. Indigenous lake residents pay less than other Guatemalans and resident foreigners, who pay less than all other foreigners. The highest prices are quoted here.

The longest route between Panajachel and San Pedro La Laguna costs Q25 (about US\$3); to Santa Cruz La Laguna is Q15 (about US\$2), to San Marcos La Laguna Q20 (about US\$2.50), and to Santiago Atitlán Q25 (about US\$3). The service runs between 6:30 and 7:30 PM. In the opposite direction from San Pedro La Laguna to San Marcos La Laguna the fare is Q10 (about US\$1.30), and to Santa Cruz La Laguna or Santiago Atitlán it's Q20 (about US\$2.50); this service runs between 6:00 AM to 5:00 PM.

These local or orilla boats that stop at all the villages will often stop at private or hotel docks. Between San Pedro La Laguna, *directos* (direct boats) cut across the lake to Panajachel without stopping in the villages along the way. The cost is the same, but they don't have a fixed schedule – they leave when they have a minimum number of people (usually 10). Tip: if the direct boat has few people, don't wait for it to fill up, take the *local*. The boats also carry cargo, usually in big baskets, on top or in the bow, and they accept big dogs.



Fresh produce market in Santiago Atitlán

## The Cost of Living

Long-term expats around the lake report a cost of living about 50% of their "back-home" cost. Of course, your cost of living will vary greatly with your utility usage and eating habits. Typical electric bills run Q600 (about US\$80) per month; water and trash service – Q60 (about US\$8); cable TV – Q160 (about US\$20); butane gas – Q300 (about US\$40); landline telephone service with mid-range internet speed – Q450 (about US\$60).



Property taxes depend on the appraised value of your property, a mid-point number would be Q1,120 (US\$145) per year.

Expats who eat and use imported “back-home” brands will pay almost double the typical Q2,000 grocery cost for locally grown and produced food-stuffs.

The exchange rate used throughout this report is 1USD = 7.84 GTQ (at publication date). For a more detailed account of monthly costs see my Lake Atitlán “[Monthly Budget](#).” For a shopping list of day-to-day items, from the Panajachel supermarket and local vegetable market, click [here](#).



Elaborate tuk-tuk in San Pedro La Laguna

An automobile is more expensive to drive in Guatemala than in the U.S. Gasoline runs about Q35 (US\$4.50) per gallon, and parts for car models not sold in Guatemala are scarce and expensive. However, labor charges for maintenance and repairs will be 10% to 20% of the U.S. charges.

The three-wheeled *tuk-tuk* motorcycle taxis circulate everywhere and are cheap, Q5-Q10. Buses and passenger pickup trucks are even cheaper: Q2-Q3 (less than 50 cents) is typical. There’s also a good private shuttle service to Guatemala City (US\$12), Antigua (US\$10), and other large or touristic towns.

If you’ve always wanted a maid or gardener, you’ll love the lake area. A twice-weekly maid can cost as little as Q450 (US\$58) per month, and a gardener Q650 (US\$83) per month.

### Long-Term Expats Cost Of Living Comparison:

- Clarke Pool (retiree in Barrio Norte of Panajachel): “I can live for probably 40% of what it would cost in the US.”
- Dave Glanville (owner of the [Posada Santiago](#) in Santiago Atitlán): “Food, rent, and other basics are about 40% of the overhead in the USA. Gasoline is expensive. Imported items are expensive.”
- [Sri and Kira](#) (owners of a small, boutique retreat and spa between San Antonio Palopó and San Lucas Toliman): “Overall the cost of living is virtually 50% less than back home. Labor is dramatically less and as vegetarians we find the cost of food stunningly low. For example a pound of tomatoes costs us roughly 25 cents and we have the pleasure of buying them direct from the farmer in a wonderful open air market.”
- Richard Morgan (retiree on the outskirts of Panajachel): “My expenses at Atitlán are less than 50% of what I would expect to have in the U.S.”
- Leo and Susan (semi-retired with a house close to Santa Catarina La Laguna): “...one third? Maybe one half. It depends on how you live.”
- Dave Ratcliffe (owner of the [Hotel La Iguana Perdida](#) in Santa Cruz La Laguna) – “The money we earn and the money we spend are probably both about 30% to 40% of what we’d see in the States or Europe. Locals obviously lead a different lifestyle and therefore spend much less.”

Panajachel has the biggest variety and the best restaurants of the villages around the lake. A typical, mid-range meal in Panajachel, San Pedro La Laguna, San Juan La Laguna, or San Marcos La Laguna will cost between Q45 and Q60 (US\$5-US\$8) including a drink. At the top end, Chez Alex on Calle Santander in Panajachel, lamb chops go for Q136, grilled flank steak for Q139, and filet of tilapia or lake bass for Q121, plus drinks.

### The Eclectic Expat Community

The expat community around the lake is small, estimated about 1,000-2,000 people, and roughly divides into three groups: 1) retired, semi-retired, and second-home partial-year expats; 2) small-business expats who own tour and real estate agencies, boutique hotels, or bars and restaurants;

3) young families who bring their children to study here. Of course, year round, there are hundreds to thousands of additional foreigners including backpackers, hippies, young travelers, and Spanish-language students who stay for a few days to a few weeks and sometimes integrate with the expat community. The expats can be further grouped by location: the village dwellers and the lakeshore folks. Since the lake is small and easily crossed by launch, the resident expats come over time to know each other and to socialize often.



A favorite expat hangout in Panajachel

The resident expats are not significant to the local economy, even though they provide construction jobs while building houses, and employ housekeepers and gardeners. They also spend money in stores and restaurants, but their economic influence is swamped by the revenues of the tourist and agricultural sectors.

According to every resident expat I talked with, a standout attraction of life on the lake is the rich, diverse, and eccentric character of the expats, and the socializing among them. By definition, I believe, foreigners who choose to live outside their home country are different and interesting people. Leo and Susan, residents on the outskirts of Panajachel, emphasized over dinner one evening that the Panajachel expat community is a matriarchal society – the strongest personalities, and most enduring of the expats, are the women. Go figure. Expat socializing for coffee, brunches, and dinners is very popular, as are private dinner parties at their homes.

### Activities Abound

Apart from socializing, there are activities for all levels of fitness and for different interests. Many of the lake's activities center on the lake and surrounding hills. Nature nuts have the choice of three close-by volcanoes and numerous hills and valleys



Kayaks are available around the lake

for hiking, rock climbing, and horseback riding. In the water, kayaking and swimming are popular. Many resident expats own their own small launches and cruise the lake shore in search of the perfect swimming, picnic, or sun-tanning spot.



Horseback tour heading for Volcan San Pedro

There are 12 villages accessible from the water; each village has its unique flavor with individual festivals, and handcrafts. Some villages have interesting open-air markets (especially Santiago Atitlán) and others sport an unusual restaurant (like *El Artesano* wine and cheese bar in San Juan La Laguna). The patron saint festivals in the villages usually run three days, and are a chaos of music, religious rituals, food offerings, markets, and partying; *Semana Santa* (Easter week) celebrations last a whole week. San Marcos La Laguna hosts perhaps the highest concentration of yoga, meditation, massage, and New-Age activities in Central America, and Panajachel and San Pedro La Laguna are famous for their club scenes.

Social-minded expats form the backbone of several NGO (non-governmental organizations) and volunteer organizations that promote language and reading literacy, vocational training, English skills, handcraft co-ops, fair trade businesses,





Basketry in the San Juan La Laguna co-op

low-cost housing, family planning, and a variety of other charitable social activities. High culture? There's very little of what North Americans call culture: No symphony, opera, theatre, film festivals, ballet, or other dance. The Festival Atitlán, a one-day event in mid-March, outside of Santiago Atitlán, provides 12 hours of modern, Latin, and indigenous music, a bizarre mixture of reggae, blues, jazz, marimba, hip hop, and indigenous rock. The Panajachel Theater Company, in their fifth season, performs skits, comedies, and plays in March.



Colonial Elegance in La Antigua Guatemala

There's no shortage of side- and over-night trips to make from your base at Lake Atitlán: Canopy zip-lining in Santa Clara La Laguna, bird watching at Finca Terrales, the coffee plantation of Los Tarrales, the huge indigenous markets in Sololá and Chichicastenango, the Colonial treasure of La Antigua Guatemala, the agricultural heartland around La Concepción, and the modernized city of Quetzaltenango. Plus the individual villages of the central highland states of Huehuetenango, Totonicapán, and Quiché, each with its unique weavings, wool, and ceramic handcrafts.

Handcraft shopping and collecting is a passion for several expats I talked with. Authentic and traditional handcrafts are

still found in the villages of the lake and highlands, although many textiles, especially *huipiles* (women's hand-woven blouses), are now disappearing as the indigenous women follow the men in adopting machine-made textiles. When shopping for handcrafts, you should always bargain hard with the vendor. The indigenous people are very sharp, know their bottom price well, and will never sell at a loss, so there's no risk of getting the item too cheap. Bargaining is expected and required to maintain "face" (yours, not theirs). If you don't bargain well, you become just another "mark" and are disrespected for that.



Sunday indigenous market in Chichicastenango

## The Property Market

Much of the Lake Atitlán shoreline is accessible only by boat. The hills above the lake are equally inaccessible except by foot paths and the occasional bumpy road. Properties for sale are usually not marked so finding your dream house or lot will be difficult without a real estate agent, or long-term resident friends who have word-of-mouth knowledge of properties. Most of the real estate agents are located in Panajachel; the most recommended is Ralph Krause of Terra-X Real Estate (see "[Lake Atitlán Real Estate](#)"). Ralph has many contacts around the lake and will search for properties to your specification, usually not a quick process.

Foreigners looking for country living generally prefer the north and north-east side of the lake for the spectacular views of the three volcanoes and the stunning sunrises and sunsets. Those foreigners looking to live within or close-by a village for their amenities generally chose Panajachel, San Pedro La Laguna, San Marcos La Laguna, or Santiago Atitlán, although there are a few foreigners scattered throughout all the villages and around the lakeside. If you're looking outside the villages, expect to do a lot of boating, scouting, and hiking during your search.

## Driving A Hard Bargain

At the San Pedro La Laguna market, I observed an elderly American bargaining in rustic Spanish with small indigenous children selling oddities and “antiques.” The children were easily besting the old man (Kini, the children called him) leading him in circles due to his poor Spanish. I was irritated that morning for some forgotten reason and decided that I’d show the children that not all foreigners are inept suckers. I began hard bargaining for their odds-and-ends while Kini watched for a while. I’ve been an experienced bargainer in Latin America since before their parents were born, and I was determined to revenge the dozens of tricks that my compatriots had suffered at the hands of these young Mayan swindlers. I was ruthless and the children were clearly daunted by an experienced bargainer with better Spanish skills than their own. It’s a question of honor not to give-in, and the children gamely kept on, finally stooping to the lowest trick, using “chulo,” (a form of personal flattery), among my protestations of price switching and cheating: my silver hair was chulo (cute), my ragged beach pants were chulos, my wife’s name was chulo...Ha! The bright innocence and intelligence of children is never a match for the treachery and cynicism of the old!



Swindling, chulo, Mayan children

At last we finished bargaining; I paid and took my items. I had exchanged a mere few dollars worth of Guatemalan coins for a fragment of tree bark with an image of a dog that appeared when submerged in water (I took their word for

it), a cacao seed shell from the only cacao tree that survived the 2011 floods, a fragment of jute rope that had secured the statue of the Virgin Mary on last year’s parade float, and half of the handle of the machete that had been used to assassinate the village priest during the civil war of the early 80s, the wooden handle miraculously transformed into flexible black rubber by the very blood of the martyred priest - my prized winning.



Lakeside homes close to Santiago Atitlán

## Registered Vs. Non-registered

There are no special restrictions on foreigners purchasing real estate in Guatemala, even on the lakes or oceans. However, there are lots of caveats; the primary one is that most properties are not registered at the national level. Only properties within the city limits of a lake village can be registered. For Lake Atitlán’s villages, the registry is located in Quetzaltenango (about one hour 15 minutes from Panajachel). Only about 10% of the eligible properties (within the villages) on the lake are registered, accordingly to Notary-lawyer José González Cox (Chema Cox), who is widely regarded by the resident expats as the go-to guy for real estate transactions on the west end of the lake. You can purchase either registered or non-registered properties, but foreigners should be cautious about purchasing properties that are not in the national registry. However, many foreigners have purchased non-registered properties without problems. The three villages that have the most registered properties are Panajachel, San Pedro La Laguna, and San Juan La Laguna, which happen to be among the villages most favored by foreigners.

## The Purchase Process

When you have found the property you want to buy and have agreed on price and conditions with the owner, you may choose to execute a contract with the seller (recommended if a substantial amount of money is paid), but many agreements are just a handshake. The notary will examine the seller’s ID and property documents, which should include the history of property ownership for as many years back as possible. If the property is already registered at the national registry, then the seller’s claim to ownership of the property has already been “titled” in a Guatemalan court. Because only Guatemalans can legally title and register a property, Notary Chema Cox



recommends that a foreign buyer insist that a Guatemalan selling a property, should title and register their property before the foreigner purchases it. A foreigner who purchases a non-registered property can never title and register the property.

After the notary judges the property title to be adequate, a good notary will do a character investigation of the seller. In the villages around the lake, sellers with bad reputations are well known, and the notary will check for multiple sales of the same property, or other possible frauds, especially if the property is not in the national registry. Finally, a good notary will check if the property is in a location that has been polluted, or is likely to flood, or to be submerged if the lake water level rises. The dimensions of the property must also be checked; a rising or falling lake level does not alter the dimensions or placement of a lakeshore lot.

Finally, if all the above checks out satisfactorily, the buyer and seller meet in the notary's office, the purchase document is signed, and the seller is paid. In addition, the buyer will pay IVA (Value Added Tax) at 12% of the appraised value of the property, plus the notary's fees (Q200 to Q5,000 - depending on the property value) and registration fees (Q160 to Q210). The notary will register the property with the appraiser, the OCRET office (see below) if appropriate, and with the municipal tax office for payment of the annual property tax, IUSI (*Impuesto Único Sobre Inmuebles*).



Volcan Atitlán, Tolimán and San Pedro

## The Major Property Purchase Caveats

- Property outside the city limits of a village, but within 200 meters of the lake, is under the control of the Oficina de Control de Reservas Territoriales del Estado (OCRET), and forms part of Guatemala's protected land. Such a property is referred to as an "OCRET property" and cannot be registered in the purchaser's name. A

foreigner, or Guatemalan, may purchase the property rights from the existing owner, but then must also pay a lease to OCRET. The new owner will have rights of possession and access, but he/she will not have full title (i.e. will not hold sovereign right of ownership). To lease an OCRET residential property, you must first register it with OCRET; once the property is registered you must then pay an annual lease of 50 centavos per square meter for residential property. For example, the annual lease for a 3,000-square-meter house would be Q1,500; about US\$200 at today's exchange rate. The lease period, though not specified by OCRET, may be 20 to 30 years and is renewable. Properties titled before 1956 do not come under OCRET's jurisdiction.

- Properties that have been donated at some time in the past do not have a clear title, as donations are revocable.
- Properties converted from registered to unregistered do not have a clear title. The last registered owner can still claim the property from the current owner.

The complexity of property ownership makes it vital to use a competent Notary/Lawyer. For a recommended notary see the "Contacts" for Panajachel and San Pedro La Laguna in the "[Lake Atitlán Village Survey](#)"

It's easy to get swept away by the beauty of the lake, the intriguing indigenous culture, and the eccentric expat communities at Lake Atitlán. The lake also has a lot of rough edges that only appear when you get down to the actual business of living here. Dave Glanville, 22-year resident and owner of Hotel Posada Santiago in Santiago Atitlán advises, "First rent, for six months or a year, to see if it's for you." Read "[Cultural notes, oddities and rough edges](#)" to learn more about the challenges of lakeside living. For a review of Lake Atitlán properties on the market in June, 2012 go [here](#).

## The Rental Market

The rental market around the lake ranges from tiny, primitive rooms in an indigenous house for Q400 (US\$52) per month, to luxury vacation rentals costing upwards of US\$1500 per week. It's hard to generalize about such a large and varied area as Lake Atitlán. The area around each village is different, offering distinct views, and the amenities depend entirely upon the landlord. For example, in Santa Cruz La Laguna, I saw

attractive apartments and houses advertised for long-term rents at US\$250, US\$350, US\$500, and US\$650 per month; in San Marcos, a nice three-bedroom house at US\$550 per month; in Jaibalito, a selection of rustic apartments and houses from US\$140 to US\$265 per month. To find out more about the character of each village see the "[Lake Atitlán Village Survey](#)."

At the start of your rental search, your first decision will be which side of the lake you prefer. For stunning views, the north and north-east sides are most popular; for amenities and expat socialization, Panajachel and the west side villages are popular. For upscale properties, I advise using a real estate agent (see the Panajachel contacts in the "[Lake Atitlán Village Survey](#)"). You can find inexpensive properties posted on the bulletin boards at the tourist hangouts in most of the villages. If you start out by asking around, someone is likely to point you to a good deal on a house that's just right for you.

Rents around the lake are cheap enough that many folks will want to rent instead of purchase. Foreigners are considered low-risk, so vacation rentals and even long-term rentals seldom require a lease. The standard long-term lease deposit is one month's rent. The least expensive housing often has no furniture or appliances, and may not have hot water, or internet access available nearby. Furnishing a house can be an expensive and inconvenient hassle, so make a list of your minimum requirements to help you compare houses.

### Health Care -The Achilles Heel



The new hospital in Santiago Atitlán

The level of health care is Lake Atitlán's significant weakness. If you need frequent, intense, or sophisticated health care, you'll spend a lot of time traveling to Guatemala City (where the health care is outstanding!). Panajachel, San Pedro La Laguna, San Lucas Tolimán, and Santiago Atitlán have primary

care doctors and clinic, and dentists, for routine procedures. Santiago Atitlán's newest hospital, *El Hospitalito*, provides excellent service at very low cost.

Other villages, Santa Cruz La Laguna, San Marcos La Laguna, San Juan La Laguna, Santa Caterina Palopó, and San Antonio Palopó, have staffed *Puestos de Salud* (public health clinics) but few private doctors. The smaller villages such as San Pablo La Laguna, Jaibalito, and Tzununa have public health clinics, where doctors and dentists visit weekly.

The expats living here use the village doctors for routine visits and first-responder care for emergencies. In case of emergency, they'll be transferred to the state hospital in Sololá by ambulance or helicopter, and ultimately to Guatemala City for surgeries or sophisticated procedures. The expats take in their stride the two and a half hour shuttle ride (US\$10-12) to Guatemala City for their doctor appointments, and do shopping while there.

Pharmacies and medical labs are available in the same villages that have clinics; the smaller villages have a very limited supply of medicines, so expats stock-up on their medicines when in Sololá, Quetzaltenango, or Guatemala City.

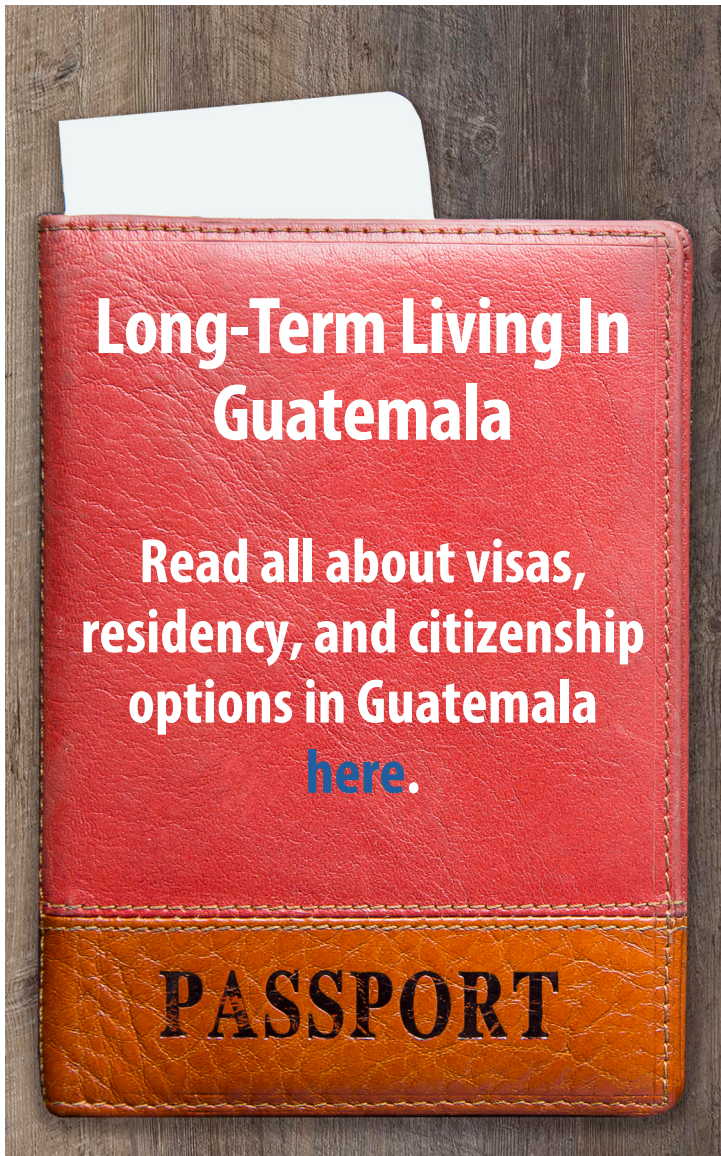
[Guatemala Medical Travel](#), a service operated by Lori Shea an American expat in Antigua, Guatemala, provides a cost comparison between medical procedures carried out in Guatemala and the United States.

The national public health insurance program, IGSS, is only available to workers enrolled by their employers at the start of the work contract. This is not available to foreigners.



West side of Lake Atitlán





Coffee beans drying in the sun

### Guatemala's Taxes

**Property tax** in Guatemala is uniform across the entire country. *The Impuesto Único Sobre Inmuebles (IUSI)* is calculated on the appraised value of a property when it is purchased, although properties can be re-appraised subsequently. Appraised values are not the same as, nor related to, actual purchase prices.

Properties with less than Q2,000.01 of appraised value are exempt from the tax. Properties appraised from Q2,000.01 to Q.20,000.00 pay 0.2%. From Q20,000.01 to Q70,000.00 pay 0.6%. And at Q70,000.01 (US\$8,992) or greater pay 0.09% in IUSI tax. You should register your property in the municipal office of the village where the property is located – bring your passport or residency ID, the property title, and a plan of the property's location and dimensions.

The national **value-added tax**, the *IVA (Impuesto sobre valor agregado)* is 12%. This tax is supposedly embedded in all products and services, although there is an enormous cash market, a "System D" economy of products and services where the *IVA* is not collected. To encourage *IVA* payment, the Guatemalan tax agency, *SAT*, assigns a tax number, the *NIT*, to all individuals, and then allows the *IVA* to be taken as a deduction against income for tax calculation, called the *ISR (Impuesto Sobre la Renta)*. People with verifiable income, such as employees of larger companies, scrupulously ask for official receipts with every purchase to lower their income tax. This has the effect of forcing many businesses to legalize and pay the *IVA* and *ISR* taxes. People in the popular cash economy



see no benefit in legalizing, and may refuse to sell to buyers requesting receipts.

**Income tax, rents, and capital gains** are treated in the same way as the *Impuesto Sobre la Renta (ISR)*. The *ISR* is too complicated to cover in this report, but here is a brief summary: Individuals register with the Guatemalan tax agency, *SAT*, either as a “small” or “normal” taxpayer. “Small” taxpayers are those whose annual sales of products or services are less than Q60,000 per year; above that amount, you are a “normal” taxpayer.

- “Small” taxpayers have a quarterly, simplified *IVA* tax payment of 5% of gross revenue. You have 10 days after the quarter ends to file and pay; the fine for late payment is 50% plus daily interest. Monthly or quarterly estimated tax payments are made for the 31% *ISR*; the final *ISR* filing and payment is made yearly in February.
- “Normal” taxpayers file the 12% *IVA* monthly, the 31% *ISR* monthly or quarterly, and a yearly filing for both the *IVA* and *ISR*.

**Inheritance tax** is determined by the closeness of the relationship between the deceased and the inheritor. Wives and children pay a graduated tax from 1% to 6% on Q50,000 to greater than Q500,000 of inheritance. More distant relatives and non-relatives pay from 2% to 25% according to the “distance” of the relationship.

The indirect **currency debasement tax**, inflation, was at 6.20% annualized in December of 2011, and is projected to be 5.16% annualized in 2012.



© Mike Anderson  
Traditional attire in Santiago Atitlán

### Cultural Notes And Oddities

- In San Pedro La Laguna, the largest identifiable group of short- to long-term visitors is Israeli; mostly young men who have just finished their military service and have vacation time. Of course, young Israeli women follow them to the lake. They are all very attractive, physical people, who tend to hang-out together, and have established three restaurants specializing in their cuisine. It's interesting to hear so much Hebrew spoken in a Mayan village.

- Indigenous Guatemalans tend to greet you with *hola* (hello) instead of *buenos días* (good morning). They will ask your name almost immediately; names are more important in the indigenous culture.

- To encourage sports tourism, in the late 1950s, black bass were introduced into the lake, where they flourished and began to feed on the native fish, wiping out most of the native fish species. Now the bass are caught primarily by spear gun.

- If approached by an indigenous person selling something, don't say you'll buy it tomorrow as a brush-off. The indigenous people take that comment as a commitment and will look for you the next day to make the sale.



© Mike Anderson  
An evangelical church dominates the San Pedro La Laguna skyline

- The evangelical (Protestant) churches have converted an estimated 40% of indigenous people, in the villages around the lake, away from Catholicism. Opinions on the reasons for this tend to emphasize the music (livelier and louder), competition among churches for members, emphasis on individual responsibility, and their focus on family and social issues such as alcoholism and domestic violence.

Others opine that the indigenous people still hold onto their pre-Hispanic beliefs and that both Catholicism and Protestantism lie interchangeably over those ancient values. Indisputably, the evangelical churches are the largest source of noise in the villages. Every evangelical church, however small, seems to have a powerful public address system, and the multiple daily services can be heard at great distance.



- Transportation by water taxi to another village for shopping, errands, or to visit friends is considered as normal, and convenient, as hailing a taxi on the streets of a big city.
- Guatemalan economist, Lisardo Bolaños, comments that remittances from relatives working outside of Guatemala have caused many young Guatemalan men to drift along instead of studying or working, preferring to just get by with this manna from heaven.



Market food vendors

## Rough Edges And Pests

Food hygiene in the villages around Lake Atitlán is still primitive. Street and market vendors and low-end restaurants generally do not disinfect vegetables and control flies. Flies are likely the primary vector of gastro-intestinal sickness among foreigner visitors. If the food, food preparation area, or table condiments are covered with flies, go elsewhere.

Street dogs are a pest in every lake village. Not only do they leave excrement in walking areas, but they may form packs and threaten strange-looking people, i.e. foreigners. In smaller villages where foreigners are less common, I always carry a stout walking stick - it has saved me from dog bites more than once.

Panajachel and Santa Catarina Palopó (the only two villages where I noticed them close to the water's edge) have small, black, flying-insects that look like flies. These insects, called *jejenes*, will bite bare legs before the victim ever knows that they are there. Their bites raise a bump or blister that itches horribly for several days. Use hidrocortisona crema (hydrocortisone cream) to alleviate the itch, and wear long pants in areas where you detect these

## A Short Course in Bargaining

- Always ask the price before showing too much interest in an item. It's generally best to ask about a different item first, and then casually ask the price of the item that really interests you.
- When you finally turn your attention to the item you really want to buy, immediately ask: "What is your best price for this item?" As soon as you start gushing over an item, the price solidifies.
- Don't be afraid to walk away as a bargaining tactic. Often the price will drop by 50% when it's evident that you're not committed to buying.
- Asking prices on tourist items are often inflated by 100%-200%. The indigenous people will never sell an item at a loss, so you should always bargain hard.
- If you bargain poorly, you will lose face and their respect, and you become the "mark." Regardless of how cheap you think an item is, you should bargain. Very cheap items are cheap for a reason, usually bad quality, are imported from China, or are mass-produced in factories.
- Lack of bargaining or poor bargaining, has corrupted the indigenous culture, lead to discriminatory pricing for many items, and has raised the cost of living for the indigenous people. Keep in mind that discriminatory pricing is a sign of disrespect.

pests. Lake Atitlán, being a humid, warm area, breeds an amazing variety of spiders that have an equally amazing ability to reproduce. Most of these are harmless to people, but spiders attract more spiders, so you should perform frequent "spider sweeps" to keep them out of your house.

Property crimes, house break-ins, purse and camera snatchings, even muggings, are an increasing problem at the lake and elsewhere in Guatemala. The breakdown of the indigenous culture by modern stresses coupled with unemployment, drug availability, and ineffective law enforcement means that foreigners should act with prudence. Take the same precautions that you would take in your back-home location. During the rainy season, electrical outages are common on the west north-west side of the lake. Most last just a few minutes, but I have experienced three-day-long outages after a severe thunderstorm.



Mayan funeral procession

## Bringing Pets To Guatemala

Guatemala requires vaccinations and a health exam for dogs and cats entering the country. In brief, coming from the U.S., you will need a health certificate by a US registered veterinarian. This certificate must be validated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and then further validated by a Guatemalan embassy or consulate in the United States. The requirements are explained in detail [here](#). A list of veterinarians in Guatemala from the U.S. Embassy in Guatemala is available [here](#).

One expat advises that you check with the airlines, if flying in. Some airlines won't fly pets into Central America in the summer months.



A successful expat business in Panajachel

## Getting Down To Business

Foreigners interested in establishing a small business will find the process very manageable, although the bureaucratic wheels turn slowly, especially the process for obtaining the initial temporary residency visa which is required before a business can be registered.

## A Cultural Faux Pas In Santiago Atitlán

A small stone flew past us and plinked on the adobe wall of the alleyway; then another stone, then another. Just two hours before, my wife, our female shop manager, and I were sailing across Lake Atitlán on a sunny afternoon, in an 18-foot homemade trimaran. We had sailed to the middle of the lake and were awaiting the afternoon *Xochomil* to blow in from the south to carry us back to Panajachel. Instead, one of the rare northerly winds blew in strongly, pushing us south, impossible to beat against. Our little outboard engine was overwhelmed, so we aimed for the indigenous village of Santiago Atitlán, and washed up on the mud beach. Out for a day sail, carrying only Q20 (US\$20 at that time) and beach towels, the girls were wearing the itty-bitsy teeny-weeny bikinis popular back in the late 1970s. As we walked up a residential alleyway towards the center, the indigenous men were outraged by this immoral display and were throwing stones towards the girls. We dashed for the market, bought T-Shirts, improvised skirts from the beach towels, and managed to pass our overnight without further incident. We learned a valuable cultural lesson that day.

Many expats started their businesses as soon as they submitted the application for temporary residency. The interviewed resident expats give mixed results and advice:

- Dave Ratcliffe (Hotel La Iguana Perdida in Santa Cruz La Laguna): “Live here for a couple of years first, before you get all excited about starting a business.”
- Sri and Kira (lakeside boutique spa and retreat close to San Antonio Palopó): “In Guatemala we are able to create a first-class environment without having to invest a first-class amount of dollars. There were certainly challenges during construction, and everything always winds up costing just a bit more than you expect, however when all is said and done we are extremely happy with the results and the lifestyle that goes with it.”
- James Gregory (Santa Catarina Palopó): “If you have solid professional experience and learn how to apply it here in Guatemala, you can survive quite well and make a positive contribution to society in the process. Do your homework. Learn the language. Understand the culture. Know what you want.”



- Richard Morgan (Panajachel): “This is not a place to expect to earn income from the local economy - in fact the government only gives residency to those that have guaranteed foreign income.”
- David Glanville (Hotel Posada Santiago in Santiago Atitlán): “I have a modestly successful business.”
- Ralph Krause (Terra-x real estate in Panajachel): “There are new business opportunities in health care, new-age activities, and teaching.”

## Setting Up Shop

The first thing you must do is obtain a business permit. This involves three major steps: Firstly, register with the national Guatemalan tax agency, *SAT*. Then, apply at the *Registro Mercantil* (Mercantile Registry) for the *Patente de Comercio* (national business permit), and finally, apply to the local municipality for the specific business permits required.

The *SAT* registration is easily obtained at the *SAT* office in any town of any size, such as Panajachel. The *Patente de Comercio* is processed at the *Registro Mercantil* in Guatemala City or, more convenient to the lake, in Quetzaltenango, (at 7 calle 27-25 zona 3, Edificio de Economía). The total cost should be under Q200 (US\$25) and take just a few days.

With the *SAT* registration and the *Patente de Comercio* in hand, you must then register with the municipality. The requirements in each municipality may vary slightly. In San Pedro La Laguna, they require a sanitary license, a health card, and a local representative who will stand behind your character and financial capacity.

## Opening A Bank Account

Every bank I talked with in Guatemala said that they would open accounts for foreigners, including Americans. The requirements for opening an account varied, only slightly, from bank to bank. In the *Banco Agro Mercantil* and the *Banco GT Continental* in Panajachel, foreigners without a residency visa need their passport, an electric bill for the house where they live, two personal references, and a legal representative who can receive notices on their behalf. An initial deposit of Q500 (about US\$65) is needed to open a checking account.

Most banks have ATMs located within or just outside the bank. A private chain of ATMs called “5B” have machines at convenient locations separate from banks in many towns. Cash in U.S. dollars and euros can be exchanged at banks, although the amounts that can be exchanged daily, weekly, and monthly, and the exchange rate, varies significantly from bank-to-bank. *Banrural*, the only bank in San Pedro La Laguna, will exchange a maximum of US\$1,000 per month.

Credit cards are accepted only at the upscale tourist hotels and restaurants, and at some travel agencies. You should expect to use cash in quetzals and centavos throughout the Lake Atitlán area.

## Registering For Utilities

I have used Panajachel and San Pedro La Laguna as examples of the availability and cost of utility services. Details of each village can be found [here in the Lake Atitlán Village Survey](#).

**Telephone** - landline phones with wireless DSL Internet are available in most villages at the lake. The phone company is called Telgua/Claro. If a landline is available at your location, installation is free if you also subscribe to their Internet service. You'll be asked to provide a neighbor's phone number so Telgua can check for available lines. The monthly cost depends on the Internet speed you chose – slowest is 256 kbps for Q155 (US\$20) per month; fastest is 10Mbps for Q800 (close to US\$100). Landline contracts are for two years; you'll need your passport, an electric bill, and bank statements to open the service. Deposits are twice your monthly rate. If you have your residency visa, the deposit is waived.

**Cell phone service** is widely available at the lake and around the country from three companies: Claro, Movistar, and Tigo. Tigo has the widest service and Movistar is the cheapest. Both Claro and Tigo offer 3G Internet service over their cell phone networks at reasonable rates. I used Claro's 3G modem with my netbook computer for Q15 (less than US\$2) per day and was pleased with the service.

**Electrical service** is available in all the lake villages. Foreigners who rent need to bring their passport (or residency ID card), a previous electric bill, the lease contract, and a Q60 (about US\$8) deposit.

**Water service** is contracted at the municipal building in each village. Bring your passport or residency ID, a previous receipt, and a copy of the property title (for new service). The installation charge is Q250 and no deposit is required. They quote one to two days for installation.

Cable TV service is available in most of the villages around the lake. The installation cost, for example in San Pedro La Laguna, is Q50 (about US\$6) plus a distance charge from the pole to your house. Monthly service is Q50 (about US\$6) for the basic package of channels. The monthly cost and number of channels varies from village to village.



Tz'utujils and Kaqchikels  
communicate in rustic Spanish

## English, Spanish, Kaqchikel, or Tz'utujil?

In the villages at Lake Atitlán, basic-to-good English is spoken in most hotels, restaurants, and tour companies associated with tourism. The lake has a 40- to 50-year association with tourism, so you can usually find people on the street who understand basic English. If you know some basic Spanish phrases, or your Spanish is simply a little “rusty” you’ll get by from the day you first arrive.

However, Spanish is not the primary language of most of the lake area. The northern and north-eastern villagers speak Kaqchikel, and the southern and western villagers speak Tz'utujil, both are descendent languages of the Mayas. Outside of Panajachel, Spanish is a second language, and the indigenous population communicates among themselves in their native tongue. The two main indigenous languages, Kaqchikel and Tz'utujil, are very different, so the people of the two groups use basic Spanish to communicate between the two.

As the indigenous population has become better educated, the level of Spanish has improved, so that the younger indigenous people speak good Spanish and basic English, the latter is also taught in some schools.

The villages most visited by foreigners, Panajachel, San Pedro La Laguna, San Marcos La Laguna, San Juan La Laguna, and Santiago Atitlán, have formal Spanish-language schools that feature one-to-one instruction. Classes are available from two hours or more per day, one to six days per week. See the [Lake Atitlán Village Survey](#) for recommended schools.

Since the level of Spanish around the lake's villages (except Panajachel) is pretty basic, foreigners can get by without sophisticated Spanish. However, to be effective at bargaining, an integral part of life here, you'll need to get beyond phrasebook Spanish. Here are some comments from resident expats about their language experiences:

- Dave Ratcliffe (Santa Cruz La Laguna): “Many expats here don't speak much Spanish and it limits their daily activities and the circles of friends they have.”
- Clark Poole (Panajachel): “Not being really fluent in Spanish, I have missed out on local and national politics, not hearing of things going on in and around town, etc.”
- Sri and Kira (lakeside by San Antonio Palopó): “What we have discovered is that our indigenous neighbors also speak Spanish as a second language and are infinitely patient.”
- James Gregory (Santa Catarina Palopó): “A working knowledge of Spanish is essential when living in Latin America. It is perhaps the great Achilles heel of the North Americans here. It is truly the key to a productive and happy life abroad; speaking the language of the country in which you reside.”

Guatemalan society is more social and courteous, at least at the superficial conversational level, than American society. Greetings are more common and more effusive and elaborate, especially among Ladinos; the indigenous folk are more reserved. Click [here for my “Social Lubrication Guide”](#) – the basics to everyday, helpful, and accepted communication in Guatemala.





Always courteous

## Don't Wait Too Long

Lake Atitlán is a good choice for people who are fit, enjoy nature's activities, and can appreciate a vastly different indigenous culture. The beauty of the lake and the great expat community are available to all residents, but if you really want to experience, enjoy, and become part of this new and different culture, you must be willing to learn intermediate Spanish and form friendships with the local people.

The easiest way to check out Lake Atitlán is to fly into Guatemala City, then take a taxi or shuttle to Antigua (about one and a half hours). Stay there for a few nights to enjoy that magnificent colonial city. Starting out in Antigua will give you an introduction to both the Ladino and indigenous cultures in Guatemala – they really are different.

From Antigua, a two and a half- to three-hour shuttle ride (US\$10-12) will take you to either Panajachel or San Pedro La Laguna. From either Panajachel or San Pedro La Laguna, visit the villages that interest you most ([see the Lake Atitlán Village Survey](#)). Keep in mind that the lake is small and it's easy to get around by launch, or by bus (the east side of the lake). Sri and Kira, owners of a spa/retreat close to San Antonio Palopó, recommend the following: "Prior to moving, check out several different areas...maybe even stay a week in each *pueblo* (village) and notice the feel and differences. Each *pueblo* has a uniqueness that appeals to different people. Give yourself time and you will find the one that offers the greatest sense of living for your particular needs. While we hesitated to make the final jump and permanent move for several years, now that we are here full time, we often smile and wonder why we waited so long!"

When you eventually find an area or village that interests you, no matter how enchanted you may be by the view, and your surroundings, rent first. A year is my minimum recommendation so you experience both the rainy and dry seasons. [VRBO.com](http://VRBO.com) is a good internet site for vacation rentals of one week or more. Cheaper long-term rentals can be found through a real-estate agent. Most of the agents are in Panajachel; Ralph Krause is highly recommended by expats; you can find his and other real estate contact information in the [Lake Atitlán Village Survey](#).



Sunset over the lake

## Our Second Overseas Home

The remodeling of our houseboat, our second overseas home, is advancing nicely. The superstructure and exterior are secure and weatherized. The fun part, the interior remodeling, lies ahead. Ana and I are looking forward to exploring the lake coastline and setting anchor in remote coves. The view from the water provides a different perspective of the magnificent beauty of the lake. We have found our second overseas destination; where life is more affordable, the possibilities unfold...


## What's Your Destination?

Days after my bargaining escapade, I ran into Kini as he walked up the hillside to his cabin; he invited me along. He rents a small furnished bungalow, with thrice-weekly housekeeper service. We rested there in wood-slat arm chairs.

Tall glasses of fresh fruit juice appeared magically beside us, and as Kini began puffing on a previously smoked cigar, we told our stories. He had lived there for three years supported by a modest pension, and a few thousand in savings. He was forced into retirement in 2008. His pension was not enough to live on in the USA, not even in Indiana. He is a widower; his children are scattered across the great North American landscape, and they had never found the courage to come down to visit. His children think he's crazy living in a Third World country, and constantly beg him to go back to the United States.

His Tz'utujil housekeeper swept-by, plucked the cigar right from his hand and disappeared, delivering a barrage of reproaches, half in mangled Spanish and half in Tz'utujil, which I presumed to be expletives from the crackle with which they were delivered. There was no question about who was boss when she was there. Disregarding her naggings, Kini retrieved and lit another half-smoked cigar. He was totally at ease, without care or worry, far from the screeching news of national debt, unemployment, and presidential campaigns. He had let go of keeping-up-with-the-Jones pretensions; he is unencumbered by possessions yet wanting for nothing.

I told him about the results of my bargaining with the Mayan children. Kini just harrumphed and opened a drawer exhibiting his large accumulation of similar treasures. We sat quietly for awhile and watched the lake as the *xocomil* blew in from the south, kicking-up waves. The sun's reflections off the waves flitted across the walls of the bungalow in mesmerizing fractal patterns with tinges of rainbow colors... hypnotic, dreamy. Kini fell asleep, dropping his cigar on the floor. I let myself out, as the housekeeper swooped by again to scoop up the smoldering cigar, fixing me with a fiercely protective look as I closed the door. I'm sure the old man was unaware of how much she loved him.

Walking back down the hillside to my boat, I reflected on Kini's life. He has found his desired destination - not merely a sandy beachside paradise, far from politicians conspiring against his pension; not simply a Shangri-La, insulated from economic and currency crises; and not just an idyllic lakeside village where Mayan children shamelessly swindle and his maid nags about his smoking habit. In fact he has found all those things at Lake Atitlán but, after family and career, children grown and gone away, beloved wife departed, friends, joys, sorrows, and experiences, he has also managed to find that most elusive of all destinations: home. 

## Overseas Retirement Letter Online Resources

[Lake Atitlán Village Survey](#)

[Interview with an Expat](#)

[Social Lubrication - What to Say And When](#)

[Guatemalan Residency Rules & Visas](#)

[Lake Atitlán Shopping List](#)

[Lake Atitlán Budget](#)

[Lake Atitlán Real Estate Examples](#)



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- What it would cost you to live there, including detailed monthly budgets...
- Whether it's better to rent or to buy, given the local market right now...
- What to take with you, what to ship, and what to leave behind...
- Which visa options would make most sense for you and how you qualify...
- Who to contact for legal help, health insurance, banking, shipping, residency, taxes...

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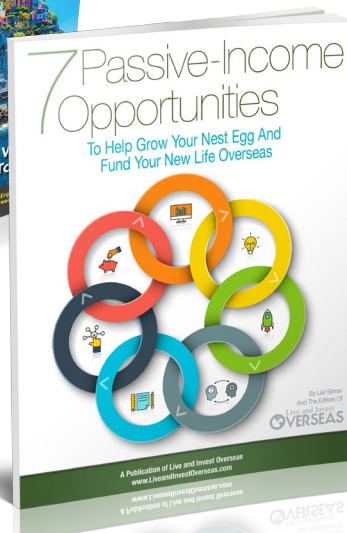
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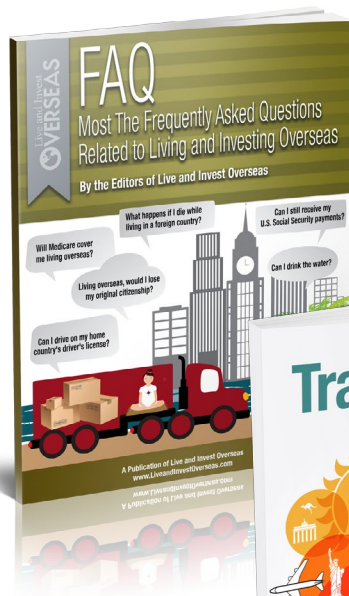


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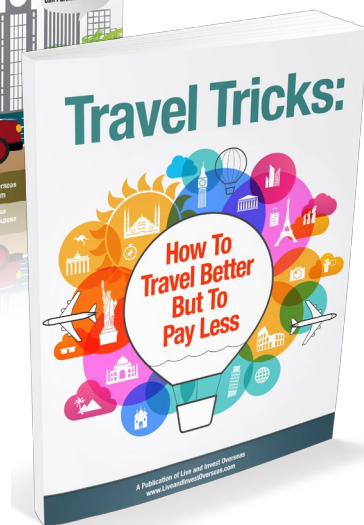


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**That's a total value of US\$153.**

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Kathleen Peddicord  
Publisher, Live and Invest Overseas

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