

Exploring Guatemala: An Example of Sustainable Travel in Central America

Ana Margarita is a native Guatemalan, and, at 13-years old, is the same age as me. Until recently, she did not have the opportunity to attend school. This is a typical story for native Guatemalan girls. However, one organization, Starfish One-by-One, has recently created the Starfish Impact School to provide native Guatemalan girls with education and individual mentoring. Over the last two years, I became interested in supporting girls' education in developing countries. Building on this interest, I decided to collect and send school supplies to support the girls at the Starfish Impact School. Although it was rewarding to help these girls from afar, I would love to meet them in person. This made choosing a destination for my travel adventure simple. I would go to Guatemala and visit the Starfish Impact School in Panajachel (in southwestern Guatemala), to spend time with the girls and learn more about the Starfish program. Regrettably, like most developing countries, Guatemala has significant environmental and economic issues, including poor water quality, deforestation, air pollution, and struggling local economies. As a responsible traveler, it would be important for my trip to be sustainable, protecting the environment and supporting local communities whenever possible. Sustainable travel is most successful when tourists take clear actions to make a positive impact on their destination.

On my trip to Guatemala, I would develop a sustainable travel plan to specifically address the environmental and economic challenges faced by many communities in Guatemala, including Panajachel. First, I would focus on sustainability in terms of water quality and usage. In Guatemala, water quality is quite poor, and efforts to protect and treat the local water supply are still being developed and implemented. Families often take drinking and cooking water from small, dirty streams. Using polluted water sources can result in skin problems, disease from

parasites, and, in severe cases, serious illness and death. Currently, USAID is monitoring water quality and watershed health in Guatemala (“Guatemala Environment”). As a sustainable traveler, I would choose hotels that emphasize reducing water usage, recycling water when possible, and preventing water pollution from excessive laundry. For my trip, I would purchase biodegradable shampoo, soap, and sunscreen because waste water often flows to rivers and oceans, and non-biodegradable products can kill plant and animal life. Limiting my water usage would also be an important goal during my trip. I would take short showers, use sink baths to reduce showers, turn off the water while brushing my teeth, and reuse towels and bedding throughout my trip.

One of the most significant environmental issues in Guatemala is deforestation. This large-scale destruction of native forest land reduces necessary atmospheric oxygen, increases harmful carbon dioxide, reduces livable human and animal habitats, leads to more extreme temperature variation, and slowly destroys beautiful and diverse rainforests. Working to reduce deforestation in Guatemala, the Forest Stewardship Council sets logging limits for manufacturing of tree products (“Guatemala Environment”). When traveling in Guatemala, I would do my part to help with the deforestation problem by using recycled tree products and managing campfires responsibly to reduce forest fire risk. I would choose tourist activities that involve a focus on native forests including zip lining, canopy tours, and hiking and mountain climbing. Finally, to counteract the increased carbon dioxide in the atmosphere due to deforestation, I would save funds to purchase carbon offsets as part of my trip.

Additionally, poor air quality in Guatemala is a significant concern. Air pollution and increased greenhouse gases speed climate change and put both habitats and human populations at increased risk. In Guatemala, air pollution primarily comes from dry-season agricultural burning

and forest fires (worsened by poor forest management) (Early). USAID is working to reduce greenhouse gasses in Guatemala at the industrial level, while local leaders are addressing air pollution and health concerns by encouraging the use of clean cookstoves instead of open cooking fires (“Environment”; “Guatemala Environment”). Sustainable travelers can support these efforts by using clean cookstoves when camping. Further, on my trip, I would support improved air quality by walking and biking whenever possible, using buses or hybrid/electric vehicles when transportation is necessary, and flying in the coach class on airplanes (both of these transportation options maximize the number of travelers transported). I would also choose a hotel that uses green energy sources including solar or wind power and energy efficient lighting because excessive energy use and air pollution are frequently connected.

Finally, poverty is a reality in much of Guatemala. While tourism is an important source of income for any host country, it sometimes benefits big businesses more than local, family-owned enterprises. The success of small businesses is essential to reduce poverty for families. Increased family incomes then support and build local industry, helping to sustain a growing economy. Traveling to Guatemala, I would make every effort to learn about the culture and support local businesses. Specifically, I would eat locally-raised foods from family-owned restaurants. I would also shop for needed items and souvenirs at small businesses and use local tour guides. Finally, I would try to stay at locally-owned accommodations or even stay with a family for part of my trip if possible.

With the support of international organizations, government involvement, and sustainable travelers, some of Guatemala’s largest environmental issues can be mitigated, making Guatemala a more beautiful and healthy place to visit and live. As a sustainable traveler, I can protect and improve the environment wherever I visit. For Guatemala, it is especially important to travel

sustainably and support local and international efforts to improve water quality, reduce deforestation, limit air pollution and build up local economies. Our world is a beautiful place made up of amazingly diverse peoples and geographies. Having the opportunity to explore it is a gift, and travelers should ensure that they protect their destinations by putting sustainable travel ideas to work. For my own dream trip to visit Panajachel, travelling sustainably is just one more way to support a bright future in Guatemala for the girls at the Starfish Impact School.

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