



CARAS ALEGRES



ORGANIZATION INTRODUCTION

¡HOLA!

Thank you for your interest in Caras Alegres - we have put together this information packet for you, to provide more information about our organization, the city we operate in, Xela (Quetzaltenango), and living and travelling in Guatemala. We hope this answers your questions. Happy reading!

Basic Information

In this handbook, we will aim to give you an overview of our history, programs, and general operations, as well as life in Guatemala. We encourage you to explore our website and Facebook pages to get a feel for our organization and the programs that we run.

Here is some basic information to get you started:

- ▶ Dutch organization founded in 2004
- ▶ Operates out of Las Rosas, Quetzaltenango, Guatemala
- ▶ We work on education and economic development for women and children

MISSION

To improve the general welfare and position of women and children living in poverty and neglect in Las Rosas, Quetzaltenango.



VISION

To combat the negative effects of poverty and give children and their parents a positive attitude towards the future.

Our contact information:

Website: www.carasalegres.org

Facebook: www.facebook.com/caras.alegres.3

Email: info@carasalegres.org

Phone (Guatemala): +502 7926 8628

Address: Diagonal 15 18-84B Zona 5, Las Rosas, Ciudad de Quetzaltenango



We are located just outside of the city of Xela (Quetzaltenango) in the Western Highlands of Guatemala. We are the orange sun on the map above, and if you follow the road to the left, you will eventually get to Parque Centro América (Parque Central, or central park), in the “downtown” centre of Xela. It takes about 20 minutes to get from the park to Caras Alegres. Buses here are inexpensive and once you figure them out, easy to use! As you can see on the map, cities are divided into zones (Zonas) and Las Rosas is located in Zona 5, while the park is in Zona 1.

Into to Las Rosas, Xela, and Guatemala

Xela is the local name for Quetzaltenango, the largest city in the department of Quetzaltenango, in the Western Highlands of Guatemala, Central America. Guatemala has a long and difficult history of civil war and political unrest. There is also a large Mayan population, with a rich culture that is present all across the country.

Xela particularly is home to many Mayan people, and you will notice this in the colourful fabrics worn by many women across the city and rural areas alike. With a population of approximately 225 000, it is the second largest and second most important city in the country of Guatemala. However, like most of Guatemala, it is plagued with inequality and social problems. Many people move to the cities from rural areas in hopes of finding work and opportunity, but due to a lack of education, as well as for some, a lack of Spanish (many rural and Indigenous Guatemalans only speak a local Mayan language), they find themselves in the poor neighbourhoods on the outskirts of the city. Las Rosas is one of these neighbourhoods.



Las Rosas is an incredibly poor neighbourhood, and many of our families live at or below the poverty line. There is a strong history of alcoholism, early marriage, and domestic violence, and there is little opportunity to access health care or other community resources. Many children leave school early to begin working with their parents in informal trade. Often, a single mother is supporting a family of her children as well as other relatives. We work in this neighbourhood with an aim to serve these families and help to better their experience, providing opportunities to the families and children that may not otherwise be available to them. Caras Alegres is one of few affordable schools for these children, and the only option for affordable childcare.

Programs of Caras Alegres



Our main goal at Caras Alegres is education - a way for both women and children to visualize and achieve a better future for themselves and their families. We achieve this through several different programs. However, not all programs are running at all times, as we are highly dependent on donations, and this dictates the extent to our programming.

- **Classrooms:** We offer two classrooms, *Kinder and Parvulos*, serving children aged 3-4 and 4-5 respectively, with a focus on educational, social and personal development. Our classes run from *8am to 12pm Monday to Friday*. Each classroom has a certified Guatemalan teacher. Both classes generally have 20-25 students each. Runs January to mid-October.
- **Daycare:** For younger children, we offer a full-day daycare program, from *8am to 5pm, Monday to Friday*, aimed at early childhood development. The mornings serve children aged 9 months to 3 years, and in the afternoons children 9 months to 5 years (when school-aged children join after class). We also offer our daycare children breakfast, lunch, and 2 snacks every day. This is run by 2-3 Guatemalan nannies. Runs January - late November.
- **After school:** For older children, we offer a free after school program. These are older students who come from schools in Las Rosas. This program serves children 6-14 years, usually between 20 and 35 children. This programming is activities such as handicrafts, ballet, football, swimming and English classes, but also free play or mildly stimulated activities in the fields of sports, games and creativity. This runs from *2pm to 4.30pm, Monday to Thursday*. This program is facilitated by our volunteer coordinator. Runs January - first week of December.

- ▶ **CALI:** Camino a la Independencia, or CALI, is a project *working with the women of Las Rosas*. Many are supporting families with no help, and are un- or under-employed. CALI provides a workspace for the women to come and practice various skills, such as *sewing, weaving, cooking, embroidery*, and more, as well as workshops to further improve these skills. For many women, this is an opportunity to become *financially independent and self-sufficient*, enabling them to support themselves and their families. Their workshop operates independently of the rest of our programming, and their space is open to them *five days a week*. Runs all year. Take a look at the CALI website for more information (caliguatemala.wix.com/cali-guatemala).

General Tips about Xela and Guatemala

Xela is a great city to live in, and attracts many tourists with its high quality Spanish schools and numerous NGOs. There is a vibrant culture here and lots to do, see, and eat in and around the city. Often referred to as one of the most accessible “authentically Guatemalan” cities in the country, Xela offers a combination of the ease and excitement of a big city with the very Guatemalan aspects of a large indigenous population and a lot of traditional cultural events.

- ▶ **Transportation:** Xela itself is about 4-5 hours from the capital city of Guatemala (Guatemala City is the capital of Guatemala, and it is often referred to as Guate), where you will arrive if you are coming by plane. Hostels in Guate and Antigua will usually offer free or cheap shuttles that will pick you up at the airport, which you can arrange in advance. It is very easy to get from the capital to Xela, as well as very affordable. You can take a first class bus (an old coach bus from the US) from Guate into Xela for about 10USD. Once in Xela, there are many taxis, chicken buses (old US school buses outfitted in amazing colours and decorations!), and micro-buses (usually very old and falling apart vans).
- ▶ Micro-buses and chicken buses within the city are generally Q1.25 - Q2.00 and take you pretty much anywhere you need to go
- ▶ Getting outside the city to other villages or landmarks in Guatemala is also really easy and affordable - you can take shuttles with tour companies, which are the most expensive, first class buses (only to some places, like Guate), or chicken buses - usually for only about Q30 or less depending on where you're going
- ▶ **Places to Stay:** Living in Xela is quite cheap by North American or European standards, and there are lots of options for places to stay. Most foreigners stay in Zona 1, the area around Parque Central. We would recommend staying here to start as it is close to many amenities, Spanish schools, and restaurants, bars, etc.
- ▶ Home-Stays: many tourists like to stay with a host family for their first week here, as it gives you an insight into the culture, three meals a day, and can be pre-arranged. We can set you up with a host-family, as can most Spanish schools.
- ▶ Hostels: there are many nice hostels in Xela, where you can get a dorm or private room, shared kitchen, and get to know some people - these often will do week or month rates
- ▶ Apartments: it is also possible to rent your own apartment or room. While private apartments are harder to find, getting a room in an inexpensive place is much easier.
- ▶ **Safety:** Guatemala is probably not as safe as where you come from. It has a lot of poverty and a history of civil unrest, which creates problems with theft and sometimes unfortunately, violent crime. Don't be scared of living in Guatemala, but be savvy!

- ▶ Don't carry your valuables on your person if you don't need to! Keep expensive phones, laptops, cameras, out of sight, or if that's not possible, in your sight



- ▶ Spread your cash out across your person, especially on buses or in crowded markets, where pickpocketing is really common
- ▶ If you do get mugged, DON'T try to save your stuff. Your safety is more important, just give it up and most likely they will leave you alone. People are poor, but generally don't want to hurt you
- ▶ Don't walk alone late at night, especially not through empty or unlit areas
- ▶ If locals and experienced foreigners suggest a certain route or trek is better undertaken with a guide, take their advice! A lot of popular hiking trails are also popular mugging spots, so be alert and go in groups
- ▶ Always carry copies of your passport and insurance on you, and keep valuable documents hidden at home - and know your insurance emergency number, as well as where to go for help locally, just in case
- ▶ **Phones & Internet:** You can buy a SIM card for a few dollars, or a new cheap phone. Local minutes are really cheap and can be purchased at any little tienda. Skype is a great option for calling home, set yourself up with some Skype minutes and you can call any number from your computer. Hostels have high speed internet, as do many apartments. There are

also loads of internet cafés if you don't have your own computer and they are usually less than 1USD per hour.

- ▶ **Insurance & Health:** Definitely buy insurance before travelling, in case any unforeseen health or travel issues arise. Most travellers will experience some kind of stomach problem during their time in Guatemala (usually travellers diarrhea), although this is easily treatable.
 - ▶ Don't be afraid of street food, but eating at places where there are lots of locals is a good bet - and give yourself a chance to get accustomed to new foods and bacteria
 - ▶ Wash your hands before eating or cooking, and wash and disinfect your food, even from the supermarket (or peel and cook at high heat)
 - ▶ There are many labs in the city where you can go to get tested if you are feeling unwell it costs about Q20 and you will then be told to go to the pharmacy (if you have parasites) or to a doctor if you need further advice. Visiting a doctor costs about Q150, and medicine is usually at cost or cheaper than back home
 - ▶ Don't drink the tap water! Water here is not potable, and should be boiled if you are going to cook with it or drink it. Hostels, restaurants, and apartments use 5 gallon jugs of pure water, and these can be bought all over
- ▶ **Visa:** Most visitors will not need a visa to come into Guatemala, but will be allowed to stay for 90 days as a tourist. After this you will need to have it renewed or leave the country for 72 hours. Please verify this before arrival!
- ▶ **Currency & Money Exchange:** The currency in Guatemala is the *quetzal* (Q). At the time of writing this, Q100 = 13USD = 12 Euros. You should have some quetzales before arrival, if possible. If not, then US dollars can also be exchanged in most banks, so bringing 25-50USD is a good idea.
 - ▶ You are able to withdraw from some ATMs in the city with a foreign credit card, as well as from the bank (be aware that there will be charges from the ATM and also possibly from your bank back home)
- ▶ **Costs:** As mentioned, living in Xela is very inexpensive compared to many other places, included other places in Central America. Some examples: a litre of beer will cost you Q25-30; riding the bus Q1.25; a decent meal at an OK restaurant Q20-30; a night in an average hostel, private room Q125; rent for a room in an apartment approximately Q700/month; bottle of water Q4-8
- ▶ **What to Bring:** Xela is in the Western Highlands at an altitude of 2300m, and has two seasons: wet and dry. Depending on the time of year it can be cold both in the days and the nights. Rainy season ("winter") is from mid-May to October/November. It usually rains everyday in the afternoons, and sometimes more. It is otherwise pretty warm. Dry season, November til April/May is "summer" here, and there is very little rain. It's warm in the day and cool to cold in the afternoons and evenings.

- ▶ All weather clothes (good boots and a rain coat)
- ▶ Hiking/trekking clothes if you're interested in that (although most guide companies can also lend/rent you things you don't have like rain pants, good boots, sleeping bag, etc)
- ▶ An assortment of casual clothes, making sure to have some sweaters as well as t-shirts and shorts, sneakers and/or sandals
- ▶ Limit the amount of expensive jewelry or clothes you bring - theft is not uncommon, and volunteering in Caras Alegres may be a bit messier than being back home!
- ▶ Swimsuit if you will go to the hot springs or the coast (Xela is a few hours from the coast and Lake Atitlan)
- ▶ Medications, your favourite toiletries, otherwise you can find most things you'll need here
- ▶ *Spanish School:* There are tons of great Spanish schools here, and living in Guatemala while studying is a great way to get speaking Spanish fast! We are happy to recommend a school, although it's really easy to tour a few schools while you're here and pick a vibe you like. You can find schools big and small, and they will all offer similar programs: 4-5 hours per day, 5 days a week of one-on-one Spanish tutoring, free afternoon cultural activities, student outings, and more.

Donations and Operations

As a non-profit organization, Caras Alegres operates solely on donations from generous supporters around the world. We are proud to say that the majority of our staff are members of the local community, and all donations go directly towards keeping Caras Alegres and our many programs alive. We also run thanks to the contributions of the many volunteers we host each year, and as such, we do not charge anything for anyone to volunteer with us. They are donating their time, and for that we are thankful!

However, some volunteers do wish to make financial or in-kind contributions, and we definitely wouldn't say no! Any contribution you are willing to make will go a long way. Below you can find some examples of operating costs to get an idea of where your donation would go. As well, you can find some commonly needed items if you are interested in bringing anything with you, or purchasing anything on our behalf. Take a look at our website under *Donate* to get an idea of how far your donations will go in Quetzales!

Financial Donations

- ▶ *Food for our daycare program, and snacks for after school*
- ▶ *Security and building maintenance*
- ▶ *Raw materials for the CALI project (fabrics, threads, etc)*
- ▶ *Sponsoring a family or a child to attend school*
- ▶ *Food boxes for families*
- ▶ *Sewing machine maintenance for the CALI project*
- ▶ *Salaries for our full- and part-time Guatemalan staff, Director, and international Volunteer Coordinator*

In-Kind Donations

If you are interested in donating goods, please contact us first to find out what would be most useful at this time - we want to make sure your donation will be put to good use!

- ▶ *Raw materials for the CALI project (fabrics, threads, etc)*
- ▶ *Craft and classroom supplies*
- ▶ *Food for our daycare program (ex. dry goods, non-perishables, etc)*
- ▶ *Indoor and outdoor games (soccer balls, roller skates, etc)*

¡GRACIAS!

We hope this booklet has been helpful, and that you know a little bit more about Caras Alegres!



Adios,

The Team @ Caras Alegres