



Volunteer Manual

Discover the Construcca Casa Volunteer Manual, your guide to our volunteer program and how you can help build decent homes in Guatemala.

www.construccacasa.org

Index



Welcome to the Constru Casa Team

Welcome Letter

Constru Casa Overview

Description and History

Mission and Vision

Poverty and Housing Need in Guatemala

Volunteer Experience

Requirements

Accommodation and Transport

Sample Itinerary and Workday

Support from Constru Casa

Cultural and Adventure Activities

Costs and Fundraising

Getting Ready for Guatemala

Reservation

Travel Arrangements

Cultural Sensitivity

Packing Suggestions

Health Guidelines

Security Issues

Communicating in Guatemala

Spanish Vocabulary





Welcome to the Constru Casa Team!

A new home can change lives, and we witness this daily in the families we assist at Constru Casa. For them, a new home means having secure floors that don't turn to mud during the rainy season, sturdy walls that withstand strong winds, and a roof that protects against water and secures their belongings. It also provides security, self-esteem, and improved economic and educational opportunities.

The experience of building a house as a volunteer with Constru Casa is equally rewarding. If you're reading this, you're already considering joining us in Guatemala. This is the first step towards an experience that will broaden your horizons, challenge your assumptions, and perhaps give you a new perspective on life.

Working on the construction site will expose you firsthand to the extreme poverty faced by many Guatemalan families. Your help is crucial for these families to build their own safe homes. You'll be part of making their dreams come true, a profoundly special and rewarding experience.

You'll share time and effort with the families, masons, and the community—a unique experience we encourage you to fully embrace. Constru Casa will be with you every step of the way, ensuring your experience is memorable and enriching.

We aim to provide you with a true cultural experience of Guatemala and a real understanding of the challenges faced by families in poverty. Over the years, we've worked with over three hundred volunteers, each leaving a deep impact and taking a piece of Guatemala in their hearts. We appreciate your commitment to our mission and hope your experience with Constru Casa inspires you as much as it inspires us to help those most in need.

Caroline van Heerde
Founder of Constru Casa





Description and History

Constru Casa is a non-profit organization that provides basic housing for families living in extreme poverty. Founded by Caroline van Heerde in 2004, Constru Casa began with the construction of the first houses and a child care center for families in extreme need. Since then, we have improved our development model and currently build an average of 80 houses per year, reaching an important milestone with the construction of our 800th house in 2015.

We collaborate closely with various social organizations working in areas such as education, health and community development. For these organizations, housing and construction are not their primary focus, so Constru Casa complements their mission by offering safe and simple houses to the people they support, many of whom live in precarious and dangerous conditions.

Beneficiary families play an active role in the construction of their own homes and contribute 35% of the total cost, which they pay interest-free over four years. In addition to the initial construction, Constru Casa provides a variety of support services, from stoves and water filters to essential home maintenance and ongoing assistance in all housing-related areas for up to four years.

Our houses are built with concrete blocks, tin roofs and concrete floors, adapting in size and design according to the needs of the families. This initiative not only improves living conditions, but also promotes physical and mental health, and facilitates better family, work and social integration for the entire beneficiary family.



Mission

Constru Casa's mission is to transform the quality of life of Guatemala's most vulnerable families by building sustainable housing and implementing comprehensive support programs. In addition, we carry out community infrastructure projects to further strengthen communities. We are committed to fulfilling our mission through:

- Building sustainable housing for families in extreme poverty.
- Collaboration with strategic partners in key areas such as housing, education, health and social development.
- Provision of ongoing services after construction, including maintenance and a four-year follow-up program for families.
- Additional support in health, education and social welfare.
- Advice, supervision and implementation of community construction projects.

Vision

A country without poverty or exclusion, where needy families experience a dignified life through our actions in housing, education and health, promoting their social and economic stability.



Poverty and Housing Need in Guatemala



lowest in the Americas, second only to Haiti. Guatemala's poverty is rooted in many social factors that manifest themselves in high illiteracy rates, poor health and often inadequate housing, poor health and often inadequate housing.

For many Guatemalans, their income barely covers daily necessities, leaving little for anything beyond basic survival. According to a 2003 report by COHRE (Centre On Housing Rights and Evictions), over half of Guatemala's population lives in inadequate housing conditions—a statistic that sadly persists today.

At Construa Casa, we invite you to join us in making a meaningful impact. As a volunteer, you'll embark on a transformative journey, helping to build homes for families in dire need. Your contribution will not only improve living conditions but also create lasting change in Guatemala. Join us and be part of a truly unforgettable experience.

Requirements Poverty and Housing Need in Guatemala

Guatemala faces one of the highest poverty rates in the Americas, second only to Haiti. This situation is due to a complex intersection of social and economic factors that result in high illiteracy rates, health problems and inadequate housing. For many Guatemalans, income is barely enough to cover basic day-to-day needs.

According to a 2003 COHRE (Center on Housing Rights and Evictions) report, more than half of the Guatemalan population lives in inadequate housing conditions. Unfortunately, these figures persist today.

At Construa Casa, we invite you to be part of the change. As a volunteer, you can participate in an unforgettable experience building homes for families in extreme need.



Join us at Construa Casa and help enhance living conditions in Guatemala. As a volunteer, you'll embark on an unforgettable journey, constructing a home for a family in need. Your contribution will make a lasting difference in their lives.

A passport: To enter Guatemala you need a passport that is valid for at least 6 months after your return.

Application and disclaimer: Each volunteer for Construa Casa needs to fill out an application form and sign a disclaimer before starting construction.

Fundraising: We ask volunteers to fundraise for a part of the houses that they will build. Please see below section 3.6 for more info.



Accommodation and Transport

We are here to assist you with all your local transportation and accommodation needs. Upon your arrival, we can arrange for a pickup service from the airport directly to your chosen accommodation. At the end of your stay, we will ensure you are returned to the airport with the same convenience.

For accommodation, you have several options to choose from:

- A homestay with a Guatemalan family, including meals
- A simple hostel
- Various hotels at different price ranges

Please refer to section 4.2 below for detailed information.

Sample Itinerary and Workday First Days in Guatemala:

Upon your arrival in Guatemala, you will get picked up from the airport and brought to your chosen accommodations. During the days before you begin work, we suggest settling in by exploring your surroundings and getting familiar with the area you are staying in. The day before starting work, you will have a welcome meeting with the Constru Casa staff, where you will learn about the organization and the building process that you will take part in.

Sample Workday

You will leave for the site at 8:00 AM and when you arrive you will meet the local masons with whom you will be working and receive instruction on your building project. During the day you will have a morning break, and a lunch break and have an opportunity to practice your Spanish and experience the Guatemalan culture while conversing and getting to know the masons. Your workday will end at 4:00 PM, and then you will return to your hotel/homestay to rest and do any planned activities you may have.

Other Experience Options

During the week, you may have the opportunity to visit a home nearby that has already been completed. We suggest taking a day or two to take a special cultural experience. There are options of climbing a volcano to see lava, visiting different museums or chocolate or coffee tours. Lake Atitlan, which is surrounded by volcanos is a beautiful and popular choice for groups to visit.

Last Days

For your last day at work, there will often be a goodbye ceremony(despedida) with the family and the Constru Casa team. You will then prepare for your departure to wherever you have planned for your nextstop.



Support from Constru Casa

- **Transportation and Accommodation:** Before your arrival, Constru Casa will arrange local or private transportation to Antigua and back to the airport. We will also assist with your accommodation preferences. Private transport costs vary by distance, averaging around \$50 per day for a minivan.
- **Comprehensive Assistance:** We will provide you with all the necessary information and support you might need during your stay.
- **Welcome and Orientation:** Upon your arrival or shortly after, a Constru Casa representative will meet with you or your group to give a detailed presentation about our organization, the impactful work we do, and the specific projects you will be involved in. There will be ample time to ask questions.
- **On-Site Support:** During your volunteer period, a Constru Casa representative will regularly visit the construction site to ensure everything is progressing smoothly and to address any concerns.
- **Weekend Activities:** We can help arrange exciting weekend activities for you. Choose from a curated list, and we will connect you with our trusted local travel agency partners to ensure you have a memorable experience.



Cultural and Adventure Activities

One of the wonderful aspects of volunteering with Constru Casa is the opportunity to stay in Antigua. This charming town, home to 34,000 people, boasts cobblestone streets, colonial architecture, beautiful churches, and historic ruins. Antigua offers almost every amenity you may need during your stay, and it's easy to navigate with most places within walking distance.

Antigua's layout is simple to understand: avenues run north (norte) to south (sur), while calles run east (oriente) to west (poniente). For orientation, Volcán Agua is always to the south, and the Cerro de la Cruz is to the north. This makes it easy to find your way around this picturesque town while enjoying its rich cultural heritage and vibrant community.





Bank and Money

The banks in Antigua are usually open, Mon–Fri 9am–6pm. For changing traveler's checks or cash, you always need to bring your passport.

- Change your foreign currency at a bank during daylight hours; there are a number of banks on the central square in Antigua.
- ATMs are located inside banks or to their side— ask the volunteer coordinator for the best location.
- While some places do take credit cards, using them in many restaurants is risking theft. Some of the restaurants and shops will charge you 4% to 5% commission on top of your bill. We suggest only dealing in cash.

Food

Antigua offers a wide variety of dining options to suit every taste and budget. For breakfast, you can enjoy a typical dish called "típico" for \$2.50 to \$4 (EUR 1.50 to 3), which includes eggs, black beans, tortillas, and a slice of fried plantain. Lunches and dinners range from \$3 to \$7 (EUR 2 to 5) or more, depending on your preferences.

Guatemalan cuisine is distinct from Mexican food, being less spicy and offering a unique but somewhat limited variety. A typical local lunch or dinner might feature chicken pepián with rice and vegetables like squash, beans with sausage and rice, or a hearty bowl of beef soup with vegetables, always accompanied by tortillas and possibly some avocado or papaya.

In addition to traditional fare, Antigua boasts numerous nice restaurants, bars, pizza places, and even familiar options like McDonald's and local fried chicken outlets. There's something for everyone, whether you're looking for local flavors or international cuisine.

Depending on what your preferences are, Constru Casa can put you in contact with a travel agency that arrange a weekend trip for you. The cost of this weekend trip will have to be covered separately and is around US\$10 (EUR7) per person for most half day activities and from US\$ 45-250 for overnight trips, depending on how you travel. Here are some options:

Volcano Pacaya (Half Day, Strenuous)

Pacaya is one of Guatemala's active volcanoes and can be reached from Antigua by car or bus in about an hour and a half. The hike up Pacaya's steep slopes takes approximately 1.5 hours to reach the summit at 3,976 meters. The altitude can be challenging, but the breathtaking views make it well worth the effort. During a nighttime stay at base camp, you may even witness lava explosions from the neighboring volcano, El Fuego!

Coffee Finca Tour (Half Day, Easy)

Visit one of the coffee fincas around Antigua and discover the fascinating process of how coffee is grown, harvested, roasted, and tasted. It's a delightful experience for coffee enthusiasts and a great way to learn about one of Guatemala's key exports.

Lake Atitlán (Two Days, Medium)

Explore one of Guatemala's most breathtaking sites. Lake Atitlán is surrounded by three majestic volcanoes and 12 traditional Mayan villages. Enjoy a boat tour of the lake, hike a volcano, visit local markets, and immerse yourself in the vibrant culture. This is a perfect getaway for those looking to experience natural beauty and cultural richness.

Cerro De La Cruz (Half Day, Easy)

For a quick and beautiful city view of Antigua, take a walk up to Cerro De La Cruz. It's within walking distance from most accommodations in Antigua. Climb the stairs to the cross on the hill and enjoy picturesque views of the city and the stunning skyline formed by the surrounding volcanoes. For safety, it is recommended to complete the hike before 5 PM.



Costs and Fundraising

Constru Casa is an NGO dedicated to supporting the poorest people in Guatemala, relying heavily on donations, particularly from volunteers. Therefore, we ask our volunteers to fundraise for a portion of the house they will help build. This contribution is not an administrative fee but directly funds the construction of the home.

The total cost of a house is US\$6,000 (EUR 5,500), with the family repaying 35% through monthly installments over four years. Individual volunteers are requested to contribute a minimum of US\$500 (EUR 450). Volunteer groups of 10 people are encouraged to collectively fundraise between approximately USD \$2,000 and \$6,000 (EUR 4,500), depending on the specific project.

We encourage you to view your contribution to Constru Casa not as a payment, but as a donation that directly benefits the family you are assisting by providing them with a new home. These donations are crucial for sustaining our building projects and ensuring that there are homes to build during your stay. We have consistently observed the generosity of family, friends, and colleagues when volunteers seek sponsorship.



RESERVATION

If you are interested in volunteering with Construcca Casa, please contact us at voluntario@construcasa.org. We will gladly check availability for you. Volunteer spots can fill up quickly during certain times of the year, so we recommend reserving your space early to ensure your participation.

Travel Arrangements

Construcca Casa will assist you with your local travel arrangements within Guatemala. You will, however, need to arrange your own flight to La Aurora Airport in Guatemala City.

Visa

Citizens from most countries do not need a visa for Guatemala (USA and European countries) but receive a tourist visa (stamp in your passport) upon entering the country that lasts 90 days.

Airport Pick-up

Please let us know your flight arrival time and flight number so we can arrange. For a shuttle. The cost of the shuttle is approximately US\$35 (EUR 30), and can be paid directly to the driver, either in Quetzales or in US\$. For groups, shuttles usually charge \$8-10 per person.

Accommodation

There is a wide range of accommodations to choose from in Antigua. This ranges from \$9 dorm rooms to luxury hotels. We can help you with reservations, according to your preference. However, we encourage volunteers to stay with a host family in a home stay.

Home Stays

Home stays offer a fantastic opportunity to immerse yourself in Antiguan family life, providing firsthand experience of Guatemalan culture, history, and a chance to practice your Spanish. Host families are incredibly friendly and welcoming, making you feel at home from the moment you arrive. Living in a different culture requires flexibility, but it promises immense personal growth through your interactions with the family.

Your host family will provide three meals daily (except Sundays) at specific times. While the family understands volunteers may occasionally eat out, they can also prepare packed lunches for your construction days. Lunch is typically the main meal, while dinner tends to be lighter (such as eggs, beans, salad, and rice), reflecting typical Guatemalan cuisine. Feel free to communicate any food preferences politely, but embrace the opportunity to try new dishes and always show gratitude.

The cost of a home stay is approximately \$95 USD per week. Since families rely on reservations and volunteer support for income, we require groups with five or more volunteers to cancel at least 15 days before arrival or pay 50% of the cost, with exceptions considered.

When staying with a host family, please observe these guidelines:

- Conserve electricity and water whenever possible.
- Respect the privacy of your host family; refrain from inviting others to the home stay.
- Most homes prohibit smoking indoors; ask before bringing alcohol.
- Overnight guests are not permitted without prior approval.

You will pay your host family directly one week in advance. These guidelines ensure a respectful and enjoyable experience for both you and your host family.

Cultural Sensitivity

Many things are done differently in Guatemala and this does not mean that it is better or worse, just different. Guatemala runs on a different pace than Europe or the US. Please have a flexible attitude and an open mind if people or meals are a little late. It is important that you greet people that you encounter. Typical greetings are buenos dias, buenas tardes, buenas noches, and mucho gusto. When entering a house or someone's property, you should always

say con permiso before entering, the response is adelante. Before taking pictures, please ask people for their permission.

Packing Suggestions

- Sturdy work pants
- T-shirts
- Comfortable, sturdy closed-toed work shoes
- Clothes suitable for layering
- Sweaters or sweatshirts
- Shower towel
- Hat for sun protection
- Work gloves — Essential!
- Safety glasses
- Small backpack
- Flashlight
- Raincoat
- Padlock (if staying in a hostel)
- Passport and IDs, with photocopies of the identification page stored in your email and shared with family
- ATM card (inform your bank of your travel plans to avoid card issues)
- Medications: stomach discomfort and motion sickness pills, hand sanitizer, insect repellent, sunscreen, and lip balm
- Reusable water bottle



Health Advice: What to Avoid During your stay in Antigua, we strongly advise against consuming:

- Tap water or ice made from tap water.
- Food from street vendors.
- Undercooked meat, fish, or prepared foods left at room temperature.
- Raw vegetables and fruits unless they are peeled and eaten immediately or soaked in treated water.
- Milk and dairy products that are not kept refrigerated, including pastries with cream fillings.

Tips for Staying Healthy

To ensure your well-being during your volunteer experience, please follow these guidelines:

- Stay hydrated by drinking plenty of water throughout the day. Carry a reusable water bottle with you.
- Wash your hands frequently or use hand sanitizer, especially before meals and after working.
- Protect yourself from the sun by wearing a hat and applying sunscreen regularly.
- Understand your physical limits and avoid overexertion. Construction work can be physically demanding, so listen to your body and make informed decisions about your capabilities and comfort levels.



Security Guidelines

Guatemala is generally safe if you take common-sense precautions. Please observe the following guidelines:

- Avoid walking alone at night, especially in empty or poorly lit areas. Taxis can be found on the east side of Parque Central and in front of the bus station. Uber is also a safe and affordable transportation option.
- Minimize the amount of cash you carry. Use a money belt and distribute your money in different places on your person. Avoid openly displaying large amounts of money and be cautious when using ATMs. Consult the volunteer coordinator upon arrival for recommended ATM locations.
- Keep a firm grip on your belongings, especially in crowded areas or when entering/exiting buses.
- Keep valuable items like cameras discreetly concealed.
- If you are confronted by a robber, do not resist and surrender your belongings calmly.
- Always have your host family's address and phone number handy.
- Carry a copy of your passport with you at all times.
- When exploring outside of Antigua, especially for walking, hiking, or running, go with a group and preferably with a local guide.
- Be cautious after consuming alcohol. Do not accept drinks from strangers and avoid walking home alone.



VOCABULARY

Basic Vocabulary

- el hotel - the hotel
- el proyecto - the project
- el restaurante - the restaurant
- el baño - the bathroom
- damas - ladies
- caballeros - gentlemen
- la cuenta - the check
- el carro - the car
- grande/pequeño - big/small
- temprano/tarde - early/late
- barato/caro - cheap/expensive
- fácil/difícil - easy/difficult
- abierto/cerrado - open/closed
- bueno/malo - good/bad
- arriba/abajo - above/below
- yo necesito... - I need...
- ¿dónde está...? - Where is...?

- con - with
- y, o - and, or
- nada - nothing
- también - also
- aquí/allí - here/there
- ¿qué? - What?
- ¿cuándo? - When?
- ¿dónde? - Where?
- ¿cuánto? - How much?
- no entiendo - I don't understand
- ¿Puede darme...? - Can you give me...
- tengo hambre - I'm hungry
- tengo sed - I'm thirsty
- tengo calor/frío - I'm hot/cold
- estoy cansado/a - I'm tired
- me he perdido/a - I'm lost
- yo quiero... - I want...

Familia- Family

- madre/padre - mother/father
- mamá/papá - mom/dad
- hijo/hija - son/daughter
- abuelo/a - grandfather/grandmother
- tío/a - uncle/aunt
- niño/niña - boy/girl (child)
- bebé - baby
- hermano/a - brother/sister
- primo/a - cousin
- esposo/esposa - husband/wife
- amigo/a - friend
- padrino/madrina - godfather/godmother
- novio/novia - boyfriend/girlfriend



Términos de Construcción

- Albañil - mason
- Ayudante - helper
- Mano de obra - labor
- Casa - house
- Cimientos - foundation
- Pared - wall
- Piso - floor
- Techo - ceiling, roof
- Viga - beam, girder
- Arena - sand
- Piedrín - gravel
- Cemento - cement
- Concreto - concrete
- Bloque - block
- Ladrillo - brick
- Hierro - iron
- Madera - wood
- Clavos - nails
- Lámina - sheet metal
- Zanjéo - groove
- Carretilla, carreta - wheelbarrow
- Pala - shovel
- Martillo - hammer
- Hacha - ax
- Piocha - pickaxe
- Escuadra - squaring tool
- Cinta métrica/metro - tape measure
- Nivel de burbuja - level
- Andamio - scaffolding/platform
- Guantes - gloves
- Hilo - thread, yarn, string
- Alambre - wire
- Zanjear - to dig a groove
- Nivelar - to level
- Cernir - to sift
- Mezclar - to mix
- mezclar - to mix
- poner - to put
- colocar - to place



We aim for your experience with Constru Casa to be one that keeps drawing you back. Guatemala offers countless beautiful places and incredible experiences waiting to be discovered. Every time you join us at Constru Casa, you contribute to new adventures and create lasting memories.



SOCIAL MEDIA

Stay connected and share your experiences with Constru Casa on Facebook, Instagram, TitkTok, or any other platform you prefer. Follow us on Facebook and Instagram to stay updated on the latest happenings in Guatemala and to witness the progress in building better lives for Guatemalans.

For more information and the latest updates, please visit our website: **WWW.CONSTRUCASA.ORG**

Constru Casa, Guatemala
volunteer mails
voluntario@construcasa.org
Tel: 3004-5573

Our partner foundation in The Netherlands:
Stichting Constru Casa
p/a Marjo Crombach, Secretaris
Diamanthof 42
5912 SP Venlo
Tel: +316 2714 7551
Email: secretaris@construcasa.nl

Feel free to reach out to us through these contacts for any inquiries or further information.

**THANK YOU FOR BEING PART
OF THE CHANGE**



CONSTRU
CASA

