

Casa Xelaju  
Xela (Quetzaltenango), Guatemala

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I enjoyed four weeks of Spanish immersion in Quetzaltenango. I studied at Casa Xelaju ([www.casaxelaju.com](http://www.casaxelaju.com)). Xela is a lovely city, situated in the western highlands, overlooked by two volcanoes, with natural hot springs nearby. The old part is quite pretty and somewhat European in a run-down third-world sort of way. There are narrow cobblestone streets, crumbling adobe houses, some old colonial Neo-Classical buildings, restaurants, bars, cafes. It is a fascinating mixture of cultures, tradition, and modernity. Women in woven traditional frocks, carrying their loads on their heads, and speaking a number of Mayan dialects walk by Internet cafes and old American pick-up trucks and school buses.

Benefits for studying in Xela

- 1) Much less expensive than other Central/South American countries. Casa Xelaju was the most expensive and largest school in Xela, and it ran at \$165/week for 5hrs. one on one teaching, room, board, and local excursions.
- 2) Xela has fewer tourists than Antigua, Guatemala or Costa Rica or Mexico, allowing for more of an immersion experience. At the same time, it is the second largest city in Guatemala so there is a lot to do in the city and surrounding villages.
- 3) Xela has a lot of volunteer organizations and so may be appealing for the socially conscious. Many schools offer medical Spanish, and I took advantage of this. Some schools are affiliated with hospitals or clinics, should students want to have a clinical experience too. I did not choose to do this and heard from friends in various hospitals in the area that the experience was not always ideal (ex. machismo of the doctors and inappropriate attitudes toward female students).

Some Caveats:

- 1) This is a very poor country and you will not always have first world amenities like hot bath water or drinkable tap water.
- 2) Take caution when traveling to Guatemala or any other Central/South American country with a history of political instability. I felt safe there, but this is a country emerging in 1995 from 36 years of civil war and that certainly affected the stability of the political and economic infrastructure.

Recommendations

- 1) Spend 3-4 weeks of language school to get the most out of the experience
- 2) Have some basic Spanish prior to going
- 3) Bring a Spanish dictionary, a book of verb conjugations, and a textbook
- 4) Travel in January – April. This is the dry season, so it is warmer with fewer insects. Summer= wet season, more students, and more tourists