



ECHOES SUPPLEMENTAL TEACHER PLANNING GUIDE: BELIZE & GUATEMALA DUAL COUNTRY PROGRAM

Practicalities

We have listed below some of the unique practicalities that apply to Interact's Belize & Guatemala, dual country programs. Please be sure to also download each respective country's Teacher Planning Guide.

SOMOS humanitarian interACTIONS

Interact has successfully established **SOMOS** which is directly related to the humanitarian **InterActions**. Groups no longer carry donations with them from the USA. You will receive and update on requested items after arrival to Guatemala and Belize. We have incorporated a visit to a local supermarket/store into your program to purchase these items. Participants should set aside \$15 US dollars each per location. This system has worked well and ensures that the centers receive the item most in need and allows a great opportunity for students to practice their Spanish and learn about the culture. Confirmation will be noted on the official activities schedule.

In Antigua the humanitarian interaction is coordinated by Tecun Uman and our homestay director, Don Mario Castellanos.

In Belize, you will visit the Santa Elena public school, where our groups meet the staff, and some teachers and students (the school has over two thousand students enrolled every year in grades 1-6). Our groups receive a tour of the school and then can interact with the teachers and students and practice their Spanish, English and even learn some Maya and Creole.



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Currency

If you have a problem in purchasing Quetzales in advance, don't be worried. Most schools do not because the quetzal is not a major currency and is very difficult to obtain in advance at any reasonable exchange rate.

For initial personal purchases, such as snacks or ice cold bottled water, we recommend that you bring a supply of clean, small denominations, especially \$1 and \$5 bills. The highest denomination should be \$20. Nearly all merchants and stores accept USDs. \$50 and \$100 bills may not be accepted because of the world problem with money laundering.

Antigua has ATM, although there are several Casas de Cambio. The latter actually has better hours and availability. The only location that has no ready ATM access is Tikal. San Ignacio has one ATM available downtown (5 min walk downhill, 30 min walk uphill back to the resort), and San Pedro also has one ATM inside a grocery store that is located about $\frac{3}{4}$ mile from the resort.

It's personal preference to use ATM or USD for exchange at casas de cambio, or perhaps a combination. Culturally, as you know, it's a good experience for students to handle a foreign currency; from a practical view, one can use USD throughout – expect to receive change in quetzales/Belize dollars. Prices in Antigua are similar to what we pay here, the closer you get to the beach, the more expensive it gets, but still considered reasonable.

You won't need to exchange in advance for Belize. US dollars are accepted everywhere in Belize. The only caution is to be aware if the posted prices are in Belize dollars (BZ\$) or USD. Most signs/menus are in Belize dollars.

Also, do not accept any bills that are torn or have writing on them, because they will be very difficult to use; "demand" clean bills. It's expected.



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Guatemala/Belize border crossing

EXPLORE is the tour operator for the Tikal day. EXPLORE will pick up your group at the Flores airport, and lock your large luggage in the vehicle(s) that you will use for the day. You will not need to worry about the large bags until arriving to the Belize Border. Participants should have their backpacks/carry-ons with them throughout the day... money, cameras, passport/documents, water, sun block and bug repellent, and anything else they may need for the day.

EXPLORE will take care of the large luggage in the locked vehicles while your group tours Tikal. After touring the site you will have lunch and a brief opportunity to spend all your quetzales (each participant will need 20 Q or US\$3 to exit Guatemala) before transferring to Belize.

Crossing the border between Guatemala and Belize is a unique cultural experience, so we want to advise the following details:

The EXPLORE drivers will get you as close to the border as they are allowed. Pending traffic, and how busy the crossing is at that time, you may have to walk 200ft or more with your luggage.

Once you're parked, the drivers will unload your bags, and each participant should make sure they have all their belongings.

Each participant should carry his/her belongings. There may be children offering to "assist" you with your bags, for a tip.

There may also be "coyotes" (legal) offering to buy your remaining Quetzales.

Walk to the "SALIDA" area of the border offices together. The officer will ask for the passports, parental permission form and the exit fee. You should advise that you are a group.

After passing immigration and customs, you will need to walk another 50ft with your luggage to where our Belize tour operator will be for your transfer to Cahal Pech (look for the Interact sign).



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REMINDER: Be sure to download and utilize the Parental Permission Form

This form should be distribute to your students. Each minor should keep the notarized form with their passport and, if requested, present it at the border crossing.

All students, under the age of 18 on the day of crossing, might be asked for a "Notarized Parental Permission" form. In the past, this requirement was exclusively enforced for a single parent who was traveling alone with child or children. The form was intended to identify a potential "family kidnap". Last year we learned that the officials have now expanded the enforcement to possibly include school groups. We want to take no chance.

These forms are NOT needed by Interact. Please do not send us copies.