

Information on El Salvador Global Village Trips with Habitat for Humanity of Charlotte

Trip Cost: This El Salvador trip will vary depending on the team size and length of trip with the average being around cost \$1,100 plus airfare.

Sample Schedule:

Saturday: Arrive in El Salvador, travel to town near where we will be working
Sunday: Fun activity, welcome to local affiliate
Monday – Friday: Work at the Habitat site
Saturday: Beach day
Sunday: Return to US

What's included in the trip fee

- In El Salvador, breakfast, lunch, dinner, housing, and transportation
- **Travel Insurance (Medical) & Travel Assistance Program** The policy includes various specifications, provisions and exclusions please read <http://www.habitat.org/gv/tci.aspx> for more information.

What's NOT included in the trip fee?

- **Plane ticket:** It will be your responsibility to book your ticket to El Salvador. There are several flights that arrive between noon and 1pm in San Salvador, El Salvador. As we prepare to book tickets, the trip leader will let you know the most affordable option and which flights he/she/they are on so hopefully you can be on the same flight. We will provide additional information if you are on another flight so that you will have the contact information of our hosts in El Salvador as well as the name and address of our hotel. If your flight does not arrive around the same time as the main group we will arrange for transportation through Habitat El Salvador to pick you up, at a cost of around \$50.
- Arrival fee (\$10) & departure fees (U.S. \$32 but usually included in the plane ticket),
- Incidental expenses: food (sodas, snacks, alcohol), and souvenirs.
- Meals en route, including meals at all airports
- Personal tools (estimated budget \$10)
- Laundry (estimated budget \$15)
- Fees to acquire a passport
- Vaccines: Please visit <http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/destinations/traveler/none/el-salvador> for CDC recommendations. Each person, with their physician, must decide what medications and vaccines should be taken prior to and during the trip. You should plan to visit at least 4 weeks before the trip. Cost can range from \$0 to \$150.
- Trip cancellation insurance

Helpful and Interesting web sites:

- For the consular information sheet (safety) - <http://travel.state.gov/content/passports/en/country/el-salvador.html>
- For some tourist info
http://www.virtualtourist.com/travel/Caribbean_and_Central_America/El_Salvador/TravelGuide-El_Salvador.html

Fundraising: If it is appropriate in your situation, you may want to consider asking others to help sponsor your trip! Usually a letter is an appropriate fundraising tool. Checks should be marked in the memo line with "El Salvador Trip" and sent attention (your trip leader's name), Habitat Charlotte, 3815 Latrobe Dr, Charlotte, NC 28211. We can also set up an on-line fundraising page through the Habitat Charlotte website. Unfortunately, these donations are not tax deductible.

Temperature: Expect the weather to be hot and humid. The sun is intense as well. Depending on where we will be staying, it may be cold at night.

Transportation within El Salvador: We will be traveling by private bus or van that has been arranged by Habitat El Salvador throughout the trip. For the time when we are doing site seeing activities we will have a van or bus to travel around in. At the site, our arrangements for getting to the job site may include going by van, bus, or walking if the site is close to our hotel.

Food: During the days we are working, we will probably eat breakfast at the hotel, lunch at the site, and dinner at restaurants around the city or in the hotel where we are staying. Care should be taken to follow the dietary guidelines that are provided by the CDC <http://www.cdc.gov/travel/camerica.htm>. We take care to drink bottled water, sodas, or coffee provided by our hotels. Unless otherwise directed by our hosts, we will avoid eating uncooked vegetables and lettuce and eating fruit we did not peel ourselves. It is not recommended to eat street food. El Salvadorian food is relatively plain (especially in the smaller areas where we will probably be working) and is not very spicy although it can be savory. For Americans used to a larger variety of foods the monotony of having eggs, rice, and beans every day can be difficult. We will try and have a variety of foods served each day, but please prepare yourself for basic fare.

Work Site: We usually work with the Santa Ana affiliate. Santa Ana is the 2nd largest city in El Salvador with approximately 250,000 people. We usually work in one of the many small communities that surround Santa Ana. We usually work on several homes and split our group up among them. We usually have a ratio of between 6-12 North Americans per home. The type of work we will be doing could include laying block, mixing cement, digging and pouring footings, filling cracks between the blocks and perhaps installing a roof or floor. It is important that we be as helpful as we can with whatever tasks we are assigned.

Packing: Please note that there will be inexpensive laundry services available. So, those who go on the trip regularly usually plan to wash a few work clothes and non-work clothes. The airlines are a major source of shipping things to El Salvador plus people returning from the U.S. to visit their families often max out their luggage amounts with gifts, often large gifts. So, we recommend that you take as much as possible, if not everything, as carry on including work shoes and some clothing for working at the site. It can take many days before luggage arrives.

Gifts: HFH El Salvador asks that you PLEASE DO NOT BRING GIFTS OF ANY KIND FOR THE FAMILIES. It's fine to bring a few "activities" to do with kids, but even coloring books and crayons should not be left at the site, nor should your tools. There are many reasons for this. First is because foreigners are associated with being rich and we don't want people asking you for money, etc., because you gave them a gift. Second, if you give a gift, the families feel obligated to give in return (most are very giving people anyway), and people of low resources shouldn't be spending money for gifts for volunteers. Third, gift giving has caused numerous problems in the local communities, especially if one family gets a gift or one child gets a soccer ball and others don't. In North American culture, gift giving is second nature, however we ask that you PLEASE refrain from doing this. Your presence in the community is a grand enough present, as many of these people have never interacted with foreigners and the intercultural exchange is much more fruitful if no gifts are involved

Theft: As in the U.S. and Canada, the greatest danger of theft in El Salvador is in the cities, especially in crowds. The most common types of theft is of the pickpocket variety, and you should always guard carefully anything you don't want to lose. You should always carry the majority of your cash and personal belongings in a "money pouch" under your clothes, never in a wallet in your back pocket. Inexpensive jewelry and watches are best to bring.

Devotionals: It is all too easy on a trip like this to not spend time reflecting on the experience. Daily devotions help us share our experiences and grow spiritually. We'd like to have various participants agree to lead us during this reflection time. Although, Habitat is an unabashedly Christian organization, it has always been open to people of different faiths. For example, here in Charlotte, the Jewish community is actively involved in the Habitat building and we have many Buddhist homeowner families. Please let me know if you are willing to lead a devotion. Take into consideration when choosing your reflection material that other people may not share all or most of your beliefs. Of course, both participation and leading a devotion are optional.

Personal Spending Money: El Salvador started a program of "currency integration" in 2001. This means that \$US are now the currency of El Salvador. The amount of personal money which you should bring varies with each individual. If you are planning to buy some souvenirs, we recommend that you bring about \$150. Bring more if you want to buy a lot of gifts or souvenirs. It's best to bring US dollars. Few banks change travelers' checks readily and

easily and people have had problems using their ATM cards. If you want to use an ATM or credit card you may want to call your bank ahead of time to make sure it will work and that they know that you are traveling there. You may or not be able to find a working ATM machine when you want one and stores may or may not accept your VISA.

ALSO MOST PLACES WILL NOT ACCEPT U.S. BILLS LARGER THAN \$20, since everyone is afraid of counterfeit U.S. bills. It is probably best to bring some \$1 and \$5 bills. Ripped and torn bills are usually rejected. Getting change in some places is a bit of a hassle as we are often dealing with small businesses. There are not a whole lot of opportunities to purchase souvenirs and these opportunities will probably be at the beginning of the trip. A money belt that goes under your clothes is recommended

Contacting the US: We will have use of a cell phone on which we can call the United States and once we arrive you can request how many minutes you'd like to buy to call home— 25 cents per minute is what we have paid recently. Most of the hotels that we have stayed at have wifi, so you can also contact people in the US through an app that operates over the internet (i.e. iMessage, skype, WhatsApp). We will provide you with an emergency phone list immediately prior to the trip and this sheet will have the cell phone number on it as well as other ways to contact the group while we are there. In some locations where we are building phone reception can be spotty. It can be difficult and expensive to make calls to the U.S. otherwise. Some U.S. cell phones do work, but the cost per minute can be high so please consult your phone provider. If you would like to use your calling card, call your service provider before you leave to get the access code for El Salvador. The hotels where we stay usually have a computer available for guests to use for emailing. However, it is not usual for those computers to be broken.

Arrival in El Salvador: When flying in to El Salvador, you will receive immigration forms while boarding or on the airplane. These forms ask for reason for visit, for which the team should *always* indicate tourism. You will also need to give an address in El Salvador, in which you can write the following street address and phone no.: Col. General Arce, Calle Jorge A. Dominguez, H#4, San Salvador, telephone: 298-3287 (This is the Habitat address and phone, but don't indicate that when filling in the form).

When you get off the plane, you will follow signs to the immigration and baggage pickup. This is downstairs from the arrival area. When you get downstairs, you will see all the immigration booths first. The one (possibly two) for non-nationals (you folks) has usually been on the right. It will take quite a lot of time to get through because all the passports have to be checked. You must buy a tourist visa for US\$10 cash (U.S. and Canadian citizens need to have these cards, UK and some others don't). If you are traveling with a different passport, you probably should have your \$10.00 ready. Teams should stay together through this process, but you will be processed individually. Once through that, you will pick up your luggage (the baggage conveyors will be obvious and to your right as you walk through the big area toward the departure doors).

After you have your luggage, you finally go through customs just before you leave the airport. You will go through the "Nothing to Declare" inspection. You will be asked to push a button just before you go through that gate. When you push the button, a light goes on. If it is green, you pass without inspection, if it is red, you will be asked to open your bags. There are not very many red lights from what we have seen, and the customs officials will not look too hard at your things if the red light does light. The red/green is done at random, so no one needs worry that they look or feel guilty when they push the button. The folks from Habitat El Salvador will greet us outside. Be prepared for big crowds as you leave the customs area of the El Salvador airport, everyone in every family comes to meet the folks arriving so there will be lots of people there. Habitat El Salvador folks will try to make themselves obvious, usually holding up a sign with Habitat's logo.

PACKING LIST

Passport with an extra copy of passport photo page
Work cloths, long pants on site (2-3 sets)
Casual clothes (3-4 sets)
Underwear
Swim suit
Work boots, hiking boots, or tennis shoes for job site
Casual shoes, teva-like shoes or flip flops
Sunscreen
Bug repellent
Tools: leather work gloves are a must and \$10 to purchase tools at hardware store in El Salvador
Sunglasses
Small bag or backpack to take to the job site
Hat
Personal hygienic items
For women, sanitary napkins or tampons
Handy wipes & waterless hand cleaner
Spending money(\$100-\$150 should be plenty for souvenirs unless you have a lot to buy)
Toilet paper & Kleenex - small amount just in case
Positive/flexible spirit
Servant attitude
Sense of humor

OPTIONAL ITEMS:

Photos of your family, house, etc. to show to people you meet. Try and choose pictures which down play your affluence or you may feel embarrassed
Camera
Polaroid camera to share photos
Fun things to do *with* kids: balloons, bubbles, crayons, etc.
Devotional items and/or bible
Other tools: masonry hammer, plumb bob, rebar cutter, wire cutter, safety glasses, or money to buy items there
Baby powder
Power bars or other kinds of energy food (there will be lots of places to buy chips, sodas, candy, etc.)
Pocket knife
Notebook for journal and pens
Addresses of supporters and friends (put names and addresses on labels for easy post card sending)
Spanish/English dictionary
Health aids, including anti-diahreal medicine such as immodium or other by prescription (ie CIPRO)
Detergent to hand wash clothing
Small flashlight
Ear plugs for sleeping
Your calling card access number for El Salvador
Cheap watch
Undergarment money holder
A few plastic ziplock bags– helpful to store things on way back & separate dirty laundry
Squeeze bottle/small water bottle for the work site (can use an empty of bottled water you get there)
Wash clothes – not a usual item provided
Towel for the beach

Packing Tips

1. Pack light. Chances are you will have to carry what you pack!
2. Tightly secure any items that may come open while traveling.
3. Borrow what you can. No sense in making a big investment in shoes or clothing you may only wear on this trip. Break in new shoes in before trip.
4. Take luggage you don't mind damaging.
5. Consider only bringing a carry on. At the least carry on several changes of clothes and your work shoes with you on the plane. It's not unusual for luggage gets lost or delayed.
6. Make a trip to Goodwill or bring old clothes for working. If you'd like you can leave them behind with the affiliate.
7. Leave room for souvenirs.
8. Pack more than enough film and batteries. They may be difficult to find or expensive.
9. It's easy and inexpensive to get clothes laundered, so you won't have to take as much clothing.
10. Pack prescription medicines in their original containers.
11. Leave valuables behind in the U.S., especially jewelry and watches.

Think about the following:

1. What is your purpose in going on this mission? Adventure? Religious/spiritual focus? Alternative tourism?
2. What do you expect physically? What do you expect facilities to be like? Hotel, restaurants, toilets, buses, accommodations at the project?
3. What do you expect spiritually? How will you be most useful? As a teacher/trainer? As a go-fer doing general tasks? As a spiritual resource? As a pilgrim?
4. What do you expect emotionally? Are there political undertones to your visit? What is the current political situation? Will you be safe? How might you be at risk?
5. What do you expect from the group? The Team Leader? Habitat International? What is your role? Can you live and work as a team member? Are you willing to take the good and bad of communal life?
6. What do you expect from your hosts? Who is in charge of the project you will visit? How do you expect to work with the local leadership?
7. How will you be involved with the local community? Are you willing to learn about where you are going to and about where you are coming from? Can you accept cultural differences?
8. What kind of house construction might you work with? Do you think your group will complete/dedicate a house? How will you feel if this doesn't happen?
9. How do you feel about going someplace that has had a lot of natural disasters? Are you and your family able to handle the risk of things such as earthquakes, hurricanes, and epidemics?
10. Are you willing to serve others in a way they want to be served?
11. Are you a flexible person? Can you adjust my thinking to time and place? When you are living, working and socializing with the same people day after day, are you willing to compromise?
12. Do you have a sense of humor? Can you laugh at yourself and see the funny side of an uncomfortable situation?

Things that may lead to frustration:**Building**

- Building schedules in the developing world are not coordinated in the same way as building schedules in North America. Building standards will also be different. Developing a relationship may be more important than getting tasks accomplished.
- The building pace may seem very slow and they may not do things the “most” efficient way
- You may experience discrimination in the tasks assigned to women versus men.
- Things may seem disorganized.
- You may run out of materials.
- Many building activities will be done with out electricity or other tools common in North America.

Food and Lodging

- Team accommodations tend to be very modest.
- Even in “guest houses” you may not have the convenience of full-time electricity or hot water.
- Meals may be mundane. You may even fear the food if you are experiencing stomach/intestinal problems.
- At the site, there may be no real toilets, and you will have to use an outhouse.

In General

- You may expect to work with one specific family all week, but actually switch around to different work sites.
- You may be frustrated by language barriers/lack of language proficiency.
- You may not be in as good a physical condition as you thought you were. The work may be harder and more physical than you think.
- You may wonder if your presence is a help or a hindrance. The homeowner, or their children, may be more accomplished at many tasks than you are.
- You may expect more or less attention than you actually receive from Habitat staff at the project.
- You may spend more time waiting for things. Service will not be what you can expect in the U.S.

The Ten Commandments of Human Relations

1. **Speak to people.** There is nothing as nice as a cheerful greeting
2. **Smile at people.** It takes 72 muscles to frown; only 14 to smile
3. **Call people by their names.** The sweetest music to us to hear our names called by someone who recognizes us and who wants to spend time with us.
4. **Be friendly and helpful.** If you have time to assist others in getting their work done or their goals achieved, do so. The best way to gain friends is to be a friend.
5. **Be cordial.** We all have days when things do not go as we would like them to. If you can be cordial to those with whom you have contact, you might help to improve someone's day. Who knows, you may just get the same favor when you need it most.
6. **Be genuinely interested in people.** Take the time to find out what is going on with people important in your life-those with whom you work. Your interest demonstrates support and concern. We all appreciate knowing that others care about what we are doing.
7. **Be generous with praise.** We do not take the time to show those around us how much we appreciate them and what they do. We all receive enough criticism to last a lifetime. Praise is contagious! If you share it, it comes back to you in multiples.
8. **Be considerate of the feelings of others.** Give others the sensitivity and consideration that you would like to receive. Sometimes a little sensitivity is just the medicine to help someone reach new heights.
9. **Be thoughtful of the opinions of others.** Everyone likes to know that his or her contributions are appreciated. The best way to have your opinions valued is to value others' opinions.
10. **Be alert to give service.** We are judged more by our deeds than by our words or best intentions. Service offered from the heart is the most important give we have to give.

A Code of Ethics for Tourists

1. Travel in a spirit of humility and with a genuine desire to learn more about the people of your host country.
2. Be keenly aware of the feelings of other people, thus preventing what might be offensive behavior on your part. This applies very much to photography.
3. Cultivate the habit of listening and observing, rather than merely hearing and seeing.
4. Realize that often the people in the country you visit have time concepts and thought patterns different from your own; this does not make them inferior, only different.
5. Instead of looking for that "beach paradise," discover the enrichment of seeing a different way of life through others eyes.
6. Acquaint yourself with local customs – people will be happy to help you.
7. Instead of the Western practice of "knowing all the answers," cultivate the habit of asking questions.
8. Remember that you are only one of thousands of tourists who visit this country. Do not expect special privileges.
9. If you really want your experience to be "home away from home," it is foolish to waste money on traveling.
10. When you are shopping, remember that the "bargain" was obtained was possible only because of the low wages paid to the maker.
11. Do not make promises to people in your visited country unless you are certain you can carry them through.
12. Spend time reflecting on your daily experiences in an attempt to deepen your understanding. It has been said that "what enriches you may rob and violate others."

El Salvador: an overview

El Salvador is the smallest, yet most densely populated of the Central American countries. Most of it is mountainous, with two volcanic chains running down the center. The average income is approximately \$1000 per year. In the past 36 years, El Salvador has suffered four earthquakes, three hurricanes and the civil war of 1980-1992, which took more than 80,000 lives. As a result, poverty and need for housing in El Salvador are extreme.

El Salvador is bordered by Guatemala to the west, Honduras to the north and east, and the Pacific Ocean to the south. For the most part, El Salvador is lush, green and surrounded by cloud-misted hills. More than 25 extinct volcanoes dot the country, the largest being San Salvador, San Vicente, Santa Ana and San Miguel. Only 6 percent of the country remains forested since the land is intensively cultivated; coffee predominates in the highlands, sugar in the lowlands and cotton on the coastal plains. However, with the highest level of environmental damage in the Americas, El Salvador runs the risk of losing its beauty, only very recently has there been much discussion concerning environmental protection laws. Many of the country's river systems suffer from pollution, and some fear that at the current rate of destruction the country will run out of drinking water in 10 to 15 years.

A wet and a dry season dominate El Salvador's climate. During the wet season (May to October), there's generally a downpour every evening. Between November and April the country is dry and dusty. Daytime temperatures vary little, reaching around 30°C (86°F) in November and 34°C (93°F) in March and April. The coastal lowlands are much hotter than the rest of the country. San Salvador is 680m (2230ft) above sea level, so it has a moderate climate compared to other parts of the country, but it's still pretty sweaty.

El Salvador: general cultural information

El Salvador has a population approaching 6 million. About half of the people live in rural areas. Major cities include greater San Salvador (1.5 million), Soyapango (251,800), Santa Ana (250,000) and San Miguel (200,000). The majority of Salvadorans are *mestizos* (mixed Spanish and Native Americans) The United Nations Human Development Index (2001) ranks El Salvador 95 out of 162 nations. Due to the effects of war and natural disasters as well as the current government policy on health-care, education and economic systems, only a small portion of the population have opportunity to advance and prosper.

People. Salvadorans are proud of their country and its accomplishments. Having endured 12 years of war it has been difficult to reach out to one another. The war left over 80,000 people dead or missing and nearly one million in exile. However past feelings of hatred and revenge are gradually being replaced with hope and cooperation. Some are discouraged by the slow pace of reconstruction and reconciliation, but on a personal level, most are patient and willing to help rebuild their nation. Salvadorans are very hard working, and all family members contribute to the family's well being. Salvadorans value personal relationships.

Time. Time is flexible: people are more important than schedules. The group is more important than the individual. Most events begin later than planned and may go on longer than planned.

Family. Family is the basis of Salvadoran society. It is a macho culture and typically the father is the head of the family, but single-parent families are common especially after the war. Most young adults remain at home until they marry and unmarried adults with children usually continue to live with their parents. Children are expected to care for their aging parents. Women care for the children and the household. Yet they often farm, clean homes, sew, tend a small store in their own home, work as skilled labor, or as professionals as well.

Dating. Dating, which is more closely scrutinized in El Salvador, generally begins after the 15th Birthday (*Fiesta de Quince Años*). This *Quince Años* is an essential celebration for girls and is more like a wedding than a birthday. It marks their entrance into society and families will go to any length to provide the celebration. Weddings on the other hand involve both a legal and religious ceremony. *Campesinos* (rural people) often enter into common-law relationships because they cannot afford a formal wedding. These "married" couples, although not legally married, refer to their partner as "*compañero de vida*" or life partner.

Sports and leisure. The national sport in El Salvador is soccer (*fútbol*). Basketball (*baloncesto*) is also popular. Soccer pitches and parks with basketball nets are common. In their leisure time people like to visit, listen to music

(the louder the better), go to the movies or just hang out. Salvadorans like any excuse for a party. They love to laugh.

Greetings. The most common greetings are *Buenos dias!* (Good morning), *Buenas tardes!* (Good afternoon) and *Buenas noches!* (Good evening). *Adíos* or *Hasta luego* are used when saying goodbye. When addressing people older than oneself, Salvadorans show friendly respect by using *Don* (masculine) or *Doña* (feminine) with the person's first name. (*Doña Rosalia*). With professionals it is important to use their title either with the family name or their full name (*Doctora Rebecca Pérez Castro*).

Food. Friends and relatives visit one another frequently as a way to maintain their relationship. Most people drop by without notice. When you eat together, anyone joining the group says *Buen provecho* and when you leave the table before others you say *Buen provecho* (May you benefit from the meal). Salvadoran food is not particularly spicy. Most people eat red beans (*frijoles*) cooked in many ways, thick corn tortillas, rice, eggs and fruit. One popular dish is *pupusas* (thick tortillas stuffed with meat, beans or cheese). People who can afford it eat beef or chicken regularly.

Clothing. Because of the climate summer clothing is appropriate all year long. Women wear dresses more often than slacks, and lightweight suits are usually worn by women in offices and factories. Although the poor do not have many clothes, they keep themselves and their clothing neat and clean. Daily showers are considered a must, even if one has no running water!

Religion. El Salvador is a Christian nation, predominantly Roman Catholic with about 25 percent belonging to other denominations. Religion is a major force in the everyday lives of people. The majority of Christian-based communities remaining are in or around San Salvador. There is not much experience of other world religions.

Education. Elementary school (ages 7-12) is compulsory. It is followed by three years of *Educación Basica*, which is optional, after which students may choose between three years of technical school or three years of *Bachillerato*, the college track. The school year begins in mid-January and runs through October. Public schools are poor quality as a result of the war, and there are many private schools. However, public or private education costs money that many people do not have. There are uniforms, shoes, books, texts, etc., and many students are required to stop attending school to begin working and contributing to the family's income. Overall El Salvador's adult literacy rate is 71 percent but only 35 percent of adults in the countryside are literate.

Health. Medical care (examinations, consultations, etc.) in El Salvador has been free at state health facilities, but all medications must be purchased, thus making it very difficult or impossible for most people. Rural areas lack clinics, while urban clinics and hospitals are in poor condition, having been damaged during the war and subsequently by the earthquakes of 2001. A large, higher-quality private health-care system is available in cities for those who can afford it.

Economy. Annual economic growth since 1990 has averaged 5 percent with an inflation rate of 7 percent. Problems remain in areas such as: large income inequality, unemployment and under-employment (which affect more than half of the population), land reform and pollution. However, ordinary Salvadorans are working hard to solve what problems they can. Nevertheless they rely very heavily on remittances from family abroad; approximately \$1.9 billion in 2001, while external aid is only 500 million/yr. The minimum wage is \$145/mo., while the cost of the basic necessities for a family of 4 is \$516/mo. meaning that most families cannot afford the basics of food, shelter, clothing, health and education even with more than one family member working.

Coffee has been the most important export, bringing in nearly half of all export earnings. Although the drop in world coffee prices has resulted in a crisis in El Salvador's coffee industry. Other exports include sugar, cotton, shrimp and clothing. The current government sees the country's most important economic resource as its people and markets them for low wages and long hours, the majority of these workers are women employed in the clothing and textile industries. Over 65 percent of those currently employed work in the service area.

Transportation and Communication. Rural people travel long distances on foot, often with heavy loads. Most urban people travel by bus. Salvadoran buses are frequent, cheap and usually uncomfortable. You can go just about anywhere in the cities or between cities. It just takes time. Taxis are available in cities (but are expensive) and many

people drive cars. Roads are not always what one would expect, and places in the city and in the countryside may be impassable except by truck or ox-cart.

The phone system is acceptable, but many people use cell phones because it is so difficult to get a phone installed.

Government. Legislative power is vested in a one-chamber Legislative assembly, which has 85 seats and is elected for a three-year term (election in 2003). The voting age is 18. The head of state and government is the president, who holds office for five years (Francisco Flores- ARENA party-elected 1999). The country is divided into 14 departments (states or provinces) and 262 municipalities. Each municipality has a mayor who has a significant amount of political power and can greatly change the lives of people in his district for better or worse.

El Salvador: history

In pre-Columbian history, a number of mezo-american cultures dominated the Salvadoran society: Olmec and Mayan peoples populated the western part of the region and eastern part of the country included the Chorti, Lenca and Pok'omame peoples. When the Spanish arrived in the 16th Century, the country was dominated by the Pipil, descendants of Nahuatl-speaking Toltecs and Aztecs, both Mexican tribes. Their culture was similar to that of the Aztecs, with heavy Maya influences and a maize-based agricultural economy that supported several cities and a complex culture including hieroglyphic writing, astronomy and mathematics.

In 1525 Spanish conquistadors led by Pedro Alvarado invaded the country. The colonial period that followed was characterized by large landholdings by a relatively small number of Spanish landowners and agriculture dominated by cotton, balsam and indigo. Most indigenous people became virtually enslaved workers on the plantations.

El Salvador became independent from Spain in 1821 after a period of struggle by the wealthy class in El Salvador. For a short period El Salvador was part of the Central American Federation, but that disintegrated in 1841. Independence from Spain did very little for the plantation workers and in fact, when coffee displaced indigo as the main export, laws were passed that turned over control of land held in common by indigenous peoples to the coffee plantation owners for coffee production. The wealth resulting from coffee export was controlled by 2% of the population.

Over the years there were attempts by the poor, mostly indigenous population to have their issues addressed, but these popular movements were quickly put down. In 1933 a socialist movement led by Farabundo Marti resulted in a particularly brutal response by the military, which effectively decimated the indigenous population of the country.

By the 1960s and 1970s, landlessness, extreme poverty and increasing repression of popular movements, trade unions and the like increased the conflict between the military backed governments and the majority of the people. Election frauds and the killing of popular leaders, including priests and other church leaders during the late 1970s brought the situation to a crisis. The assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero in March 1980 was one of the main sparks that started the civil war. This 12-year conflict pitted the popular movements, banded together under the banner of the Faribundo Marti Liberacion Nacional (FMLN) against the military. This bloody conflict led to the disappearance or deaths of some 80,000 Salvadorans, and the migration of more than one million Salvadorans to the US, Canada, Sweden, Australia and other countries

The civil war was finally brought to an end by a UN negotiated peace accord in 1992 after it became apparent that there would be no clear winner of the conflict (in spite of US backing of the military to the tune of some \$6 billion). The signing of the peace accords brought a period of high expectations of significant change. There were some positive achievements in terms of land distribution and the establishment of a more open political process in which the FMLN became a legitimate political force. However, in the time since the peace accords there has been no appreciable improvement in the economic and social conditions of the majority. The result has been increasing violent crime, partially fueled by street gangs initially formed by gang members deported from North America. High unemployment and other detrimental social changes brought about by changes in the formerly agricultural society to one based on the use of low cost labor for manufacture of goods for export in increasing numbers of free trade zones have also affected many. The natural disasters: Hurricane Mitch in 1998 and the two major earthquakes of 2001 have only worsened the conditions of so many Salvadorans.