

**Background on Chajul**

**Location**
Chajul sits at roughly 2115 meters (7000 feet) above sea level in the highlands of Guatemala in the department of Quiché. The terrain is rugged and mountainous with expanses of forest, cornfields, and pastures. The lush green countryside makes the Ixil region spectacular for hiking. The Ixil region includes the three towns and counties of Chajul, Nebaj, and Cotzal. The region is most famous for its beautiful mountainous landscapes and authentic Mayan culture. Nebaj is the largest, most equipped, and most developed town in the region with a few tourist restaurants, hotels, and a variety of shops. Chajul and Cotzal are of a similar smaller size and see relatively few visitors. Chajul is by far the most traditional and well-preserved town in the region.

**County and Town of Chajul**
The county of Chajul has a total population of about 50,000 people spread among villages dotting the mountainous countryside, while the town of San Gaspar de Chajul, often referred to simply as Chajul, has a population of under 20,000. Within the town of Chajul, 60% of the population is under 15 years old and over 95% is indigenous Maya. The people of Chajul retain much of their ancient culture including traditional hand-woven and hand-embroidered clothing worn by the women, certain Mayan religious ceremonies, and traditional foods. Chajul has very basic infrastructure with small shops, a few basic hotels, and very simple local restaurants (comedores).

**Weather**
In general, Chajul has a damp and often chilly climate, comparable to the US’s Pacific Northwest. The rainy season is from April to November, although it sometimes also rains during the rest of the year. While sunny days are warm, nights can be cold and occasionally reach freezing levels. Weather in Chajul is unpredictable – a sunny morning can quickly turn into a cold and rainy afternoon. There is no heat in any buildings in Chajul or Nebaj, therefore packing in layers in anticipation of variable and potentially cold weather is recommended.

**Current Situation**
Chajul was particularly hard hit by the 36-year long Guatemalan civil war, during which over 200,000 indigenous people were killed. The population continues to suffer from complex post-war effects such as land displacement, emotional trauma, and divided families. Presently, while Chajul is rich in culture and traditions, residents live in extreme poverty. Most families are focused on the survival of today. Town infrastructure remains basic and underdeveloped. In Chajul, entire families live in one-room adobe houses with dirt floors, very little light, and poor ventilation. Smoke from open cooking fires blackens the walls of the homes and presents severe health risks to families. Chajul’s economy is rooted in corn-based agriculture. Ninety percent of the community’s crop production is corn, 95% of which is used for family self-consumption. Due to unsanitary living conditions, intense smoke inhalation from open fires, and diets that consist predominantly of corn, the three leading causes of death are respiratory problems such as pneumonia, bronchitis, and tuberculosis (34%), intestinal infections and illnesses (17%), and malnutrition (13.7%). Women and children are at a particular disadvantage in Chajul. Only five percent of children graduate from middle school and less than one percent graduate from high school. This is due to both financial limitations and the expectation that children should leave school at an early age to contribute to
the family income with jobs such as working in the fields, hand-washing clothes, producing artisan products, carrying wood, or shining shoes. For more information please refer to LHI’s “Overview and Background” document.

Language
The community of Chajul is primarily monolingual Ixil. Each of the three towns of the Ixil region has its own distinct dialect of Ixil. In this area, learning Spanish is a privilege enjoyed only by those who have the opportunity to go to school. Many people in Chajul speak little or no Spanish, and roughly 70% of the population over 15 years old is illiterate. A small number of residents of Chajul speak the Maya language of Quiché, are monolingual Spanish, or speak another Mayan indigenous language.

Religion
Most of Chajul is Evangelical and attend a variety of Evangelical churches up to four times a week. A smaller portion of Chajul is Catholic. While only a few people practice ancient Mayan rituals, many customs, beliefs, and values continue to be part of the culture.

A Day in the Life of a Chajulense
Days typically begin around 5:30 a.m. Women wake early to begin preparing breakfast for their family, a meal most often comprised of fresh corn tortillas and coffee. At 7:30 a.m., children who are fortunate enough to attend school dress in their uniforms and often walk more than 20 minutes to school. Depending on the school, students either study during a morning or afternoon session. Children who are not old enough or whose families lack sufficient financial means stay at home with their mothers, and are expected to help out in the household, occupy themselves, or care for their younger siblings. Many families have upwards of six children in one household. Men and boys leave early in the morning to work in the fields or cut wood; few hold consistent jobs in Chajul. While the men are away, women spend their time tending the house, preparing meals, weaving, going to the market, or washing in their pilas, large basins with standing water used for washing dishes, clothing, and hair. Women also regularly go to the mill to grind their corn and coffee. Students return from school around 12:30 p.m. to eat at home with their families; those who study in the afternoon leave at this time for their walk to school, having eaten lunch a little earlier. Lunch often consists of boxboles (the Ixil region’s typical food of squash leaves wrapped around corn dough), tortillas, and/or beans. After lunch, students who attend school in the morning use this time to help around the house or try to earn money for their family. In general, families maintain self-sustaining lives, eating the corn they grow themselves and cutting and carrying their own firewood. To earn money for their necessary purchases, people work in the fields as day laborers, or sell wood, weavings, corn, and prepared foods like tamales. Money is usually spent as soon as it is earned. A small number of families own stores, grow organic coffee for the local cooperative, or have a trade or profession. In the evening, families typically gather around the warmth of their open fire and eat the last meal of the day together.

Limitless Horizons Ixil’s Work in Chajul
LHI’s mission is to work in partnership with the indigenous Maya Ixil community of Guatemala to create opportunities for empowerment and to advance sustainable community development in Chajul. LHI was co-founded in 2004 by Pedro Caba, a Civil Engineer from Chajul, and Katie Morrow, an American Social Worker. Currently, LHI operates a scholarship program for over 70 students with built-in support services including tutoring, computer classes, a study center with computer lab and library, access to a work study program, guidance counseling, activities, and field trips. LHI also runs Chajul’s first public library, a safe wood-burning stove initiative, a career development program, intensive Spanish language courses, an artisan program, community workshops, and a sustainable tourism program.