

Destination Central America



The Maya city of Palenque (p57) surrounded by verdant rain forest, Chiapas, Mexico

Easy to overlook on a map, this compact seven-country link between North and South America is a dynamo of culture, ancient ruins, wildlife and activities – a true backpackers' paradise. Nowhere else packs in as much in so slender a frame. For starters, try climbing trembling and lava-gurgling volcanoes – many perfect cones poke above the cloud line, like something out of a kindergarten drawing. Less-strenuous jungle walks lead past unforgettable, overgrown Maya pyramids or into the lairs of the puma, sloth, howler monkey and quetzal. Surfing towns are found up and down the Caribbean and Pacific shorelines, where waves slap at white- and gold-sand beaches. No excuses if you've never surfed; lessons are cheap. If you prefer getting under water, diving outfits can get you certified and bellying up with nurse sharks at coral reefs for some of the world's lowest prices. Don't fuss if you want to go somewhere other than a beach to relax. In lazy-day Spanish-colonial towns, haciendas transformed into language schools and hostels line cobbled streets where vendors in cowboy hats push squeaky-wheeled carts. Or you can arrange homestays in Maya or Mosquito villages, where many traditions live on as if the 'Conquest' were a bad dream.

Many visitors reach the region overland: bus or boat connections from Mexico (and the USA) are a breeze; some continue on to South America. But, with so much on offer, more travelers are making Central America their sole destination. Already Mexico's Yucatán (included in this guide), Guatemala, Belize and Costa Rica are big-time destinations, and Nicaragua is now being billed as the next big thing. No worries if you haven't been here yet. Some of the world's most rewarding, yet to be 'discovered' destinations await you (such as El Salvador's Ruta de las Flores, or the ultra-raw jungle of Honduras' La Moskitia or near Panama's Darién Gap). If you want to know what the travel world will be bragging about tomorrow, go find it in Central America now.

HIGHLIGHTS

BEST BEACHES

Little Corn Island (Nicaragua) ■ Totally chilled, still-unspoiled Caribbean island with US\$5 snorkeling, US\$10 beach huts and fresh fish cooked up at a slo-o-ow pace (p518)

Roatán, Bay Islands (Honduras) ■ The region's hub for the best (and cheapest) scuba-diving courses; plus God-sent white-sand beaches at West Bay (p410)

Pavones (Costa Rica) ■ End-of-the-road beach town attracts surfers and beach bums, with nights at a beachfront cabin from US\$8 and US\$20 for a yoga retreat (p622)

Bocas del Toro (Panama) ■ A Caribbean six-island archipelago with laid-back locals, sea turtles, kayakers and surfers eyeing the Caribbean beaches (p681)

Tulum (Mexico) ■ Mexico's backpacker hub is getting overexposed but sand-floor bungalows, surf-side Maya ruins and nearby sinkhole swimming holes still fill great lazy days (p53)

BEST ACTIVITIES

Volcano Climbs ■ These conical beauties are mesmerizing to look at, and better to climb. Nicaragua's unreal volcano-formed Isla de Ometepe (p503) extends past the cloud line, while Central America's highest point at Guatemala's Tajumulco (p140) is for experienced hikers only

Surfing ■ Board-toting surfers – or wannabes – are pouring into Central America for gnarly breaks in Nicaragua (p486), Hawaii-style (and some less intense) breaks off Bocas del Toro's islands, Panama (p681), beginners' breaks at Playa Tamarindo, Costa Rica (p593) and 'surfing villages' at El Salvador's La Costa del Bálsamo (p293)

Rafting & Boat Trips ■ The white-water rafting buzz rings loudest at Honduras' La Ceiba (p392) and Costa Rica's Río Pacuare (p567), while DIY boat adventures are best in Costa Rica's canal maze near Tortuguero (p570)

Diving & Snorkeling ■ Caribbean reefs rank high among the world's underwater highlights: notably Honduras' Bay Islands (p406), Belize's northern cayes (p230) and Mexico's Cozumel (p51)

Hiking ■ El Salvador's Parque Nacional El Imposible (p304) tempts hikers with possible walks to Pacific views and swimming holes; if noises in the dark don't scare you, take a guided night hike in Nicaragua (p494) and Costa Rica (p577)



ALFREDO MARQUEZ

Crystal-clear water laps against a tranquil cay, Bocas del Toro (p681), Panama



Ready for the colorful procession to mark Semana Santa (p109), Antigua, Guatemala

BEST FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Carnaval (Panama) ■ The meaning of life answered: in costume, with dance (and drink) during the nation's raucous four days preceding Ash Wednesday; the best are in Panama City (p658) and at off-the-beaten-track Las Tablas (p695)

Semana Santa (Guatemala) ■ Hundreds of revelers in purple robes wander the cobbled streets of Antigua, which are covered in carpets of flower petals and colored sawdust (p101)

Palo de Mayo (Maypole; Nicaragua) ■ A month-long party for fertility – the non-stop dancing, loud music and outrageous floats of Bluefields are a far cry from the original British tradition (p513)

Chichicastenango Market (Guatemala) ■ Central America's most famous Maya market fills this mountain village's streets on Sunday and Thursday with open-air stalls selling masks, colorful clothes, produce and toys (p128)

Mérida Weekends (Mexico) ■ Who needs a beach when weekends mean partying like this? The cobbled center closes for a pedestrian-only unapologetic ode to joy, with salsa bands, dancing, taco stands – every Saturday and Sunday (p45)

BEST WILDLIFE

Darién Province (Panama) ■ Wilder than the Amazon, the Gap is ruled by its majority – wildlife: pumas, jaguars, tapirs, howler monkeys, bulldog-sized rodents and wild boars. Tours here are expensive but crucial for night hikes or dugout canoe rides to remote reserves (p703)

Barrier Reefs (Belize, Mexico) ■ Swarms of tropical fish – plus nurse sharks and stingrays – cuddle up to snorkelers and divers at reef sites in Belize's northern cayes (p230), while in remote Punta Allen, Mexico (p56) tours meet up with dolphins

Parque Nacional Tortuguero (Costa Rica) ■ Along 'mini-Amazon' river canals, caimans (and 400 species of bird) goof-off inches from your canoe, while sea turtles nest on the Caribbean coast (p570)

Parque Nacional Soberanía (Panama) ■ A birder's highlight just outside Panama City: about 500 species of tropical birds have been spotted on walks along the Pipeline Road (p666)

Lago de Yojoa (Honduras) ■ Over 400 bird species – including the ever-elusive quetzal – exercise their wing muscles around the mountainous lake (p359)

BEST HISTORIC SITES

Tikal (Guatemala) ■ Steep Classic-period Maya pyramids and towering ceiba trees that house scores of howler monkeys, emerge from the jungle floor. Where else could have been the site for the rebel base camp in *Star Wars*? (p194)

Panama Canal (Panama) ■ Sneaky US diplomacy and land-cutting miracles led to this early 20th-century, 80km link between oceans west and east. Going through by your own barge costs US\$30,000 – or just US\$5 to visit (p664)

Around Perquín (El Salvador) ■ Somber ex-guerrilla headquarters from the nation's civil war – with abandoned bunkers, bomb craters and a massacre site – is a chilling testimony against war (p315)

Palenque (Mexico) ■ The Maya world's finest setting: a sprawling city founded 2000 years ago where mountains, jungle, plains and hammock cabañas meet (p57)

León (Nicaragua) ■ A Sandinista heartland remains linked with the past; Nicaragua's progressive rival to Granada is a richly colonial town, and you explore its original incarnation under the shadow of Volcán Momotombo (p480)

BEST OFF-THE-BEATEN-TRACK PLACES

Río Dulce Boat Trips (Guatemala) ■ Outside Livingston, boats drift past jungle-frocked gorges and through a reserve where manatees hang out; the best bet is sticking around for DIY dugout canoe trips and visits to Q'eqchi' villages (p183)

Río San Juan (Nicaragua) ■ Take a boat ride on the tree-lined Río San Juan past the pirate-fighting Spanish fortress (where everyone else turns around) and all the way to San Juan del Norte on the Caribbean coast (p511)

Mountain Towns (El Salvador) ■ Out-of-the-way kick-back spots missed by most include quiet Alegria's flower-lined porches, crater lake and coffee plantations (p306), and Juayúa in the Ruta de Las Flores (p301)

Darién Gap (Panama) ■ Rugged and difficult, the Darién Gap area awaits for *Heart of Darkness* trips into Central America's most untamed wilds – one option is a boat ride into jaguar turf at Río Sambú (p708)

La Moskitia (Honduras) ■ This huge remote pocket of Honduras boasts canoe trips from Garífuna villages and frisky wildlife scenes, including sea turtles and hundreds of bird species (p429)



Sunshine highlights the baroque façade of the 18th-century Iglesia de la Recolectión (p482), León, Nicaragua

ITINERARIES

Central America's slim figure – with a curve here and there – gives just a little room for creative looping itineraries. The easiest way, time willing, is going from top to bottom (or bottom to top). That said, there are a couple of multicountry trips with one gateway that can be taken without much backtracking. To see it all (essentially a combination of everything that follows), give yourself at least three months. If you only have two or three weeks, though, you're best sticking with a country or two. Or just drop in and see where the wind directs you – hey, it's your trip.

See p737 for information on open-jaw air tickets to Central America, and p742 for the duration of some major bus trips.

NORTHERN LOOP

Guatemala, Mexico, Belize, Honduras & El Salvador

This route loops through much of the region's northern highlights, starting from **Guatemala City** (p89). Head straight to colonial **Antigua** (p101) for a few days, doing a volcano climb and perhaps a crash course in Spanish. Then get a chicken bus to other highland sites; at stunning **Lago de Atitlán** (p113) skip the gringoburg of Panajachel for a few days of hiking and swimming from an atmospheric base such as hippie-friendly **San Marcos La Laguna** (p126) before continuing on to **Chichicastenango** (p128) to see the famous Maya market. Add a couple

Mountains, jungle, beaches, ruins: this diverse route is the classic introductory trip to Central America, mixing plenty of culture, adventure and serious relaxation. Many visitors linger in one place longer than expected, and save a slice or three for the next trip.



of extra dollars a day to the budget and venture north to Mexico on a 'Chiapas loop' to witness modern Maya life at the mountain town of **San Cristóbal de Las Casas** (p62) and the Maya ruins amid the jungle at **Palenque** (p57). Visit the riverside ruins of **Yaxchilán** (p62) en route to the mother of Maya sites, back in Guatemala, **Tikal** (p194). Bus east to Belize, stopping for a Frisbee golf round at a jungle base outside hilly **San Ignacio** (p244) before splashing into the Caribbean's wonderful reefs at laid-back **Caye Caulker** (p230).

Caye-hop south, stopping at off-beat **Hopkins** (p252) or more mainstream **Placencia** (p253), before boating to Guatemala's **Livingston** (p180) to take a serious jungle boat trip along the **Río Dulce** (p183).

Cross into Honduras and head for the cobblestone town of **Copán Ruinas** (p367), offering river tubing trips, horseback rides over mountains, and the namesake ruins. Bus to **Gracias** (p378), and thank the colonial town for its proximity to a quetzal-rich national park.

Southward in El Salvador, stop in the kitschy mountain town **La Palma** (p321) for hikes over high-up log bridges. Bypass San Salvador for the Pacific 'surf villages' of **La Costa del Bálsamo** (p293), where you can get US\$10 lessons. Catch a Guatemala City bus from San Salvador.

SIDE TRIPS

If you're big on ruins, detour from Palenque to colonial **Mérida** (p45) stopping at **Uxmal** (p48), then visit **Chichén Itzá** (p44) and **Tulum** (p53). Bus to Belize, then go west to Tikal.

If you've 'done Mexico,' though, skip it. From Chichicastenango head to **Nebaj** (p133) for day hikes and a few days in **Quetzaltenango** (p136) to explore volcanoes and traditional villages. Then bounce on the bus for three days on an unreal 150km journey to **Cobán** (p162) and on to Tikal.

Need to have more water? Before seeing Copán, detour to the party-activities hub of **La Ceiba** (p392) and boat to the **Bay Islands** (p406) for some diving.

SOUTHERN LOOP

Costa Rica, Panama & Nicaragua

Nicaragua and Panama frame the more tourist-trodden Costa Rica. Starting in **San José** (p538), take the bus-and-boat trip to the English-speaking Caribbean coast and turtle country at **Tortuguero** (p570), then boat and bus back south to the party-surf town of **Puerto Viejo de Talamanca** (p565). Cross into Panama and boat along narrow, tree-lined canals to the Caribbean archipelago of **Bocas del Toro** (p681) for island-hopping and a surf day. Then head to Central America's nicest capital, **Panama City** (p648), with its Havana-like charm and a look at the **Panama Canal** (p664). Bus west, via David, to the cool coffee highlands around **Boquete** (p674) and look out over the Pacific and Caribbean from atop **Volcán Barú** (p678).

Bus back to Costa Rica, taking the ferry from Puntarenas for checking out the boho hangout of **Montezuma** (p599) on Península de Nicoya, near swimming holes, wilderness beaches and surfing in **Malpaís** (p601). Get back to Puntarenas to reach Nicaragua's double-volcano **Isla de Ometepe** (p503), after hammock swings and rum at fun, but gringofied, **San Juan del Sur** (p500), then visit colonial **Granada** (p488), with volcanoes and eerie night hiking. Bus, via Managua, to Rama for a boat to Bluefields and a boat out to **Little Corn Island** (p518) for serious snorkeling and kick-back time.

Retrace your steps to Managua for a direct bus back to San José.

HOW LONG?

Minimum: 5-8 weeks

WHEN TO GO?

Any time. Just before or after peak season (December to April) misses most crowds and tropical storms

BUDGET?

US\$25-40 per day, US\$10 more at beach towns and in Mexico

HOW LONG?

5-7 weeks

WHEN TO GO?

Any time. Just before or after peak season (December to April) misses most crowds and tropical storms

BUDGET?

US\$20-40 per day, more at beach towns

Witness Central America's greatest wildlife scene in the more expensive (and popular) Costa Rica, before feeling that 'whoa now!' jolt of crossing into its much less-visited, cheaper neighbors. Both are in the running for the 'new Costa Rica,' with volcanoes and a rich coastline on either ocean side.



SIDE TRIPS

An alternate trip back to Costa Rica from Nicaragua is across the border at Los Chiles, after taking a boat ride along the **Río San Juan** (p511). In Costa Rica, bus via Ciudad Quesada, to **La Virgen** (p583), a rafting highlight.

If you have a splurge fund, consider an unreal (very) adventure near the **Darién Gap** (p703) in Panama, or take a flight to visit the Kuna at the fascinating San Blas islands at the **Comarca de Kuna Yala** (p700).

HOW LONG?

5-7 weeks

WHEN TO GO?

Generally dry season (December to April); note mountain hikes will get sloppy (and dangerous) in peak rainy season (September to October), while rains can dampen Bay Islands' trips November to February

BUDGET?

Guides for hikes or dives add to costs; count on US\$40-50 per day

ACTION ALL THE WAY!

Into activities? The great outdoors is fun in an isthmus with volcanoes, mountains, rivers and waves to get your fix in. If you've never surfed or gone diving, no excuses! Central America is a great place to learn.

Starting in Guatemala's highlands, get into the regional swing with a guided bike ride around **Antigua** (p108). Chicken-bus it to wee **Nebaj** (p133) and arrange a three-day hike through the Cuchumatanes Mountains to **Todos Santos** (p150). From colonial Quetzaltenango, set aside two days to climb Central America's highest point, **Volcán Tajumulco** (p140).

Bus via Guatemala City to Honduras' **Copán Ruinas** (p367), a more touristy hub with great US\$20 horseback rides and its famous ruins. Campers should make their way to **Parque Nacional Montaña de Celaque** (p381), near Gracias, and take butterfly-lined paths to campsites in the cloud forest. Bus to **La Ceiba** (p392), Honduras' activities and party center, with canopy tours and rafting tours of the Río Cangrejal. Boat out to the **Bay Islands** (p406), for snorkeling or great reef dives and US\$25 certification courses.

Southwest in El Salvador, stop in artsy **Suchitoto** (p318) and go by horseback to former FLMN hideouts at Volcán Guazapa. Pass on the capital for **La Libertad** (p290), the nation's surf capital. Bus to Nicaragua,



stopping in colonial **León** (p480) for a climb up and slide down a nearby volcano. Give a couple days at least for **Isla de Ometepe** (p503), a volcano island in a sea-sized lake with hikes up to – and past – the clouds.

Costa Rica is flooded with options (and visitors). DIY canoe rides through the **Tortuguero** (p570), accessed via Río San Juan, remains a Central America highlight. In the south, **Parque Nacional Chirripó** (p616) has a well marked two-day trail to the country's highest mountain, with a US\$10 bunkhouse way up.

In Panama detour from David to **Boquete** (p674), near Volcán Barú and rivers to raft. Brush up on your newly tested surf skills at one of the region's best waves, at **Santa Catalina** (p693). Before you end your trip, get some roller blades to traverse the causeway along the mouth of the Panama Canal near **Panama City** (p656). Or just see a flick.

'I ONLY HAVE TWO WEEKS!'

Laments such as this crop up all the time: 'I want to see Central America but only have a couple weeks; where should I go?' The best advice is sticking with some highlights in a country or two. Perhaps sample 'tomorrow's Central America' in El Salvador and Nicaragua; many first-timers often stick with Guatemala. An 'open jaw' ticket – flying into one place and out of another – helps you get the most out of your time.

Apart from choosing a sample from the earlier itineraries, here are a couple stabs at what you can accomplish in just 14 days.

The Box Ticker: Panama to Guatemala

All of Central America in 14 days? You nuts? OK. Here's a way to see most countries, traveling overland and mostly by day. Start with two

Central America is a paradise for the active – surfing, diving, hiking and boating options easily rank up with the region's top highlights. This trip – from Guatemala City to Panama City – assumes an open-jaw ticket.



With just two weeks up your sleeve, you can make a mad, crazy dash and try to see as much as you can, or you can just take it very, very easy soaking up the culture of a people who are not about hurrying.

nights in **Panama City** (p648) – see the canal and colonial Casco Viejo. Bus 15 hours to **San José** (p538), arriving at 3am on the Tica Bus. Taxi to one of the hostels with a pool; do a day trip to **Parque Nacional Braulio Carrillo** (p556) to climb a volcano. Get the morning bus for a 10-plus-hours trip to Nicaragua’s colonial wonder **Granada** (p488) for a couple nights wandering past the plaza’s mango trees and to take a canopy tour down a volcano. Wake *early* for a long day: get the Tegucigalpa bus (roughly 10 hours) and a Copán Ruinas bus (seven more), and allow yourself two full days’ rest in **Copán Ruinas** (p367) – but not forgetting the nearby Maya ruins. Get a shuttle bus (six hours) to **Antigua** (p101) for the last couple of days in the volcano-studded highlands, hopefully squeezing in a day trip to the **Chichicastenango market** (p128). End the trip in Guatemala City.

Get Real: Belize to Honduras

Wherever you go, travel’s ultimate highlight is the local people you meet. This trip – from Belize City to Tegucigalpa – gets local on Central America’s arsenal, sticking with traditional villages where long-rooted traditions live large. Hang out with Garífuna in **Dangriga** (p250), best during the Garífuna Settlement Day festival (November 19), then sing songs with a Maya family at a homestay outside **Punta Gorda** (p257).

Ferry to Puerto Barrios, Guatemala and bus to **Cobán** (p162) to stay in the cloud forest for a couple days with a Q’eqchi’ family.

Bus east into Honduras, where you can hang on the beach and try local coconut bread at low-key Garífuna villages such as **La Ensenada** (p391) then bus from **Santa Rosa de Copán** (p376) to see the Lenca market at cliff-hugging **Belén Gualcho** (p381). It’s a seven-hour bus ride to Tegucigalpa.

Getting Started

Some travelers argue that the more you sit and think about a trip, and the more you build it up, the more disappointing it is when you get there. Bollocks. Half of the fun is reading up, planning, getting tickets, talking with just-back travelers and studying maps – even if all your planning gets tossed out the window once you arrive.

This chapter helps answer the first big questions for a trip, including when to go and what kind of cash you'll need. For more information, also see the Central America Directory (p719).

WHEN TO GO

When are you free? Any time of year will be pretty good (as long as a hurricane isn't on the same itinerary). Beaches are best for a dip around February; the hills remain refreshingly cool about August. However, the seasons here are less distinguished by temperature, and more by weather and tourist activity.

Peak tourist season coincides with the dry season – known as *verano* (summer), which is roughly between Christmas and Easter's *Semana Santa* celebrations (attractions in themselves). Though hotels fill up at this time – and raise their prices – you'll usually find a room even in big-time tourist destinations such as Antigua in Guatemala, or Cancún in Mexico. On either side of this period – mid-November or mid-April – can be the best time to visit.

For climate charts of select cities in Central America, see p723; see also Climate in the Directory of each country chapter.

WHAT TO TAKE

Almost everything can be found in towns of significant size in Central America. However, there are some items that can be hard to find or expensive to the point of offense.

- An alarm clock is necessary to make it on those early buses (and many do leave early).
- Take books if you're certain to read or be waiting for transport. However, new and used books in English are available at book exchanges in big cities and tourist hangouts.
- Camping gear if you plan to camp; bring it all (except fuel for the stove) as equipment isn't often available, and what is can be costly.
- Condoms and birth-control pills are available in larger towns, but it's convenient to bring your own.
- A flashlight is definitely needed for powerless beach huts and checking out ruins.
- Photocopies: copy your passport, airline ticket, any visas and traveler's check numbers; pack these separately from the originals.
- A peek at a snapshot or two of the family back home will be appreciated by your new Central American friends. Single women may want to bring a photo of a fictitious husband (and a ring).
- Rain gear: a thin waterproof jacket and a rainproof sack for your pack is a God send; you may be dry in the bus, but your pack on top can get soaked.
- Repellant: this must-have is not as readily available as in Central America, so you might as well get it now.
- A Spanish phrasebook as these guys are more expensive here than back home.
- A universal sink plug & clothesline for washing your laundry and hanging up wet clothes.
- A water filter bottle is great if you're camping or going into Honduras' La Moskitia. Aquamira has a good instant-purified water bottle for US\$19..

Most days during the rainy or wet season, called *invierno* (winter) – roughly May through November or early December – are blessed with variable pockets of sunshine and cheaper airfares. Often a suddenly blackened sky will drop rain in the afternoon for an hour or two, and then clear up again. But flooding and days of rain can happen, particularly problematic for those mountain hikes. Hurricanes and tropical storms are an even more serious concern, as they can last for days (most often coming in September and October up and down the Caribbean coast) and affect the whole region.

HOW MUCH?

Bottle of beer US\$0.70-2

Bus ride (3hr) US\$1.60-14

Dorm bed US\$3-15

Hotel double US\$8-30

Internet access per hr
US\$1-2

Set lunch US\$1-5

COSTS & MONEY

Central America is not an expensive place to travel. Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua are the cheapest countries to visit, with El Salvador and Panama comprising the second tier. Travel costs in Belize, Costa Rica and Mexico are a jump up from other Central American countries (particularly those Mexican buses!), but even in these countries you can still usually find dorm beds for as low as US\$8 or US\$10, and a bed in a guesthouse for US\$15.

How Much Do You Need?

In general, it's possible to get by on a daily budget of US\$15 (in Nicaragua) to US\$40 (in Mexico), depending on which country you're in. This range is a bare minimum per day, involving staying in a hostel with a free breakfast and internet access, having a simple lunch and dinner, seeing an attraction and riding a few hours to the next town. Bring more than you think you'll need and allow yourself the means for a splurge now and then for nice meals, drinks and hotels with air-con, as well as for a snorkel trip, a tour or a guide. Staying in a reasonable hotel room with air-con will cost you an extra US\$15/20 for Nicaragua/Mexico. Sample costs are provided on the first page of each country chapter.

How to Carry Money

It's wise to store some spare US dollars in case of an emergency – at least a couple days' budget. ATMs are widely available in the region; though, if

10 TIPS TO STAY ON A BUDGET

- Always ask the price before agreeing to any services.
- Eat set lunches in local markets, buy boiled corn from street vendors – cut back on those tempting Western brekkies (at US\$3 or US\$4 a pop).
- Walk around – from bus stations, to museums across town – to save using taxis.
- Team up with fellow travelers – solo travelers often pay the same as a couple pays, and a group of three or four sharing a hotel room can work out cheaper than staying in a hostel.
- Cut back on the *carves* (beer), parties. A buck or two per bottle adds up.
- Avoid repeatedly buying small bottles of water; buy water in bulk, drink boiled water or bring a purifier.
- Go 2nd-class; cheaper buses – those stuffed ex-US school buses painted in bright colors – can be up to 50% cheaper.
- Slow down. Slower travel means less transport, more time to figure out the cheap deals.
- See fewer countries – fewer countries means fewer entry visas and less distance to travel.
- Skip Mexico, Costa Rica, Belize and Caribbean party towns – all are pricier.

DOS & DON'TS

- Do tip 10% at restaurants unless a service charge has been included.
- Do use the formal *usted* to address locals until they go to *tú* first.
- Do read up on recent history – many locals may be suffering from recent civil wars that your country may or may not have contributed to – it's worth knowing beforehand.
- Don't go into shops shirtless or in a bikini – though the beach may be nearby, some communities are offended by informal attire.
- Don't expect everything to rush at New York pace.
- Don't take photographs of religious ceremonies or people without asking.

your personal identification number (PIN) is more than four digits, ask your bank if it will be accepted before heading off. For general information on money for the region, see p729, as well as the Money sections in each country's Directory.

Foreigner Prices

Note that many museums and national parks throughout Central America charge higher admission fees for foreign tourists. It's sometimes about twice what locals pay, but still pretty cheap. Keep in mind what the locals earn before complaining. Some places may offer student discounts, otherwise don't haggle; they're set prices.

CONDUCT

There are a few things to keep in mind about 'being good' in Central America. Remember life here probably goes at a slower pace than yours back home. See also Responsible Travel (p4).

Introductions

A simple *buenos dias* or *buenas tardes* (good morning or good afternoon to English speakers) should preface your conversation, including simple requests. When you enter a room, even a public place such as a restaurant or waiting room, it's polite to make a general greeting to everyone. It's also nice to say hello to your bus mate (and your bus mate's chicken).

Indigenous People

The term *indio* or *india* to refer to indigenous people is generally quite rude; the word *indígena* for indigenous men and women is widely used.

Dress

It's worth paying attention to your appearance here. Latin Americans on the whole are very conscious of appearance, grooming and dress; it's difficult for them to understand why a foreign traveler (assumed to be rich) would dress scruffily, when even impoverished Central Americans do their best to look neat. Your relations can be smoother if you're looking spick-and-span. This also applies for dealings with officialdom (ie immigration officials and police).

Casual dress is becoming more acceptable, though. You may see local women wearing miniskirts – an unthinkable occurrence in the not-so-distant past – but not everyone appreciates this attire, and some locals may find it offensive. As a foreigner, it's a good idea to steer toward the conservative, so as not to offend. A general rule is to notice what the people around you

PRE-TRIP INSPIRATION

Films

A bit of celluloid can whet the appetite for a sense of Central America before a trip. Several big-budget films have been set in various parts of Central America. It feels icky to say it, but Mel Gibson's *Apocalypto* offers a remarkably graphic version of Classic-era Maya life (though set in post-Classical period, but oh well, the two periods were only five or six centuries apart). For an idea of the jungle's scope, see *Jurassic Park* or *Congo*, both filmed in Costa Rica. Some scenes of the James Bond flick *Moonraker* were filmed in Guatemala. The best of this mainstream bunch, however, is *The Mosquito Coast* (starring Harrison Ford), which was set in Honduras and shot in Belize.

The more serious side of things are handled in a number of films. *Salvador* is Oliver Stone's take on El Salvador's civil war. The top of the must-sees includes Gregory Nava's memorable *El Norte*, which follows two Guatemalan refugees trying to reach the USA, and Barbara Trent's *The Panama Deception*, a pull-no-punches documentary on the US invasion of Panama.

Woody Allen's *Bananas* is a banana-republic spoof set on the fictional island of San Marcos; not real Central America, but it's funny.

Print

Travelers along the Ruta Maya (Maya Route) should read a bit about those ancient civilizations. Michael D Coe's *The Maya* or the fascinating *Breaking the Maya Code* are probably the best. For travelogues, Peter Moore's *The Full Montezuma* recounts a late '90s trip with a new lady friend from back in Australia. Paul Theroux's *The Old Patagonia Express: By Train Through the Americas* includes the region, and his *Mosquito Coast* prompted the film. Ronald Wright's *Time Among the Maya* is a classic travelogue of the Ruta Maya, though now in its third decade. *The Path Between the Seas*, by David McCullough, follows the efforts to make the Panama Canal. Published in 1992, Tina Rosenberg's still-engaging *Children of Cain* tackles political violence in Latin America. See p722, as well as many of the Books sections in each country's Directory for other recommended reading.

But for the best reading of all, see what other travelers are writing about Central America at Lonely Planet's discussion board, **Thorn Tree** (<http://thorntree.lonelyplanet.com>). See p728 for a list of useful online sources.

wear and dress accordingly (though that doesn't mean all the guys should wear black Metallica T-shirts though).

Shorts are usually worn by both sexes only at the beach and in coastal towns. You'll notice that many local women swim with T-shirts over their swimming suits, and you may want to do the same or be prepared to receive a lot of male attention. T-shirts are also a great way of avoiding sunburn. See p734 for more suggestions for women travelers.

Show particular reserve in how you're dressed when entering churches. Shorts, short skirts and tank tops are a definite no-no.

Another consideration about your appearance is safety. Even cheap imitation jewelry (much less a video camera dangling around your neck) spells 'r-i-c-h a-s h-e-l-l' to many would-be thieves, particularly in the capitals. See p724 for more on basic travel safety.

Snapshots

CURRENT EVENTS

Visitors sticking with beaches, colonial towns, Maya ruins and jungle walks may not notice that Central America is undergoing rampant urbanization. According to a UN estimate, the years since 1970 have seen all countries in the region except Guatemala move from a predominately rurally based society to a predominately urban one (most markedly in El Salvador). Villagers and farmers are running out of work options as more land is used for timber and cattle (largely to supply US hamburger chains). Meanwhile, rising real-estate prices – partly spurred on by the inflow of money sent from family members living abroad (and expat Americans and Europeans finding homes in Central America, particularly in Costa Rica and Mexico) – are hurting the chances of many to buy land. Increasingly, those without means – and some estimates suggest 60% to 70% of Central America lives below the poverty line – are simply heading for the city (if not to the USA via Mexico).

Joining the new arrivals to Central American capitals are convicted criminals, sent back home from the USA (as mandated by recent legislation) following any gang-related convictions. Unsurprisingly, the growing reports of gang activity in Central America and murder occur mostly in urban areas. In El Salvador, for example, about 10 people are murdered a day, while in the first 10 months of 2005 Guatemala reportedly saw 4300 killings (and very few convictions). Disturbingly, some of the murders are of street children.

The most infamous gang is the Mara Salvatrucha (or MS-13), a highly organized, multinational gang founded in Los Angeles and named after army ants – the total membership supposedly tops 100,000. (For more see p269.) Very few travelers witness such violence; see p724 for more information.

Killings aren't limited to the streets. In February 2007 three Salvadoran congressmen who had driven into Guatemala were stopped by Guatemalan police, searched (in vain) for drugs, then killed execution-style. Several officers were arrested, then killed in their jail cells. No one is sure what's afoot, but some observers believe the events hint at how far corruption may extend in Guatemala's police force and government, through which roughly two-thirds of the USA's cocaine supply travels en route from South America.

Politics, meanwhile, swing both left and right. In Chiapas the leftist Zapatista militia-army (see p63) has shown some signs of slowing down in recent years, though its leader Subcomandante Marcos made a highly publicized motorcycle tour across Mexico in 2006. Elsewhere many civil-war figures from the '80s are re-emerging in politics. In Nicaragua former president and Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega was voted back in office in 2007 (using pink as a campaign color!), while El Salvador has elected many

'If we cannot export goods, we will keep exporting people.'

OSCAR ANIAS SÁNCHEZ, COSTA RICAN PRESIDENT AND WINNER OF THE 1987 NOBEL PEACE PRIZE

For insight into the multinational Mara Salvatrucha gang, download the 2006 report 'The World's Most Dangerous Gang' by *National Geographic's* 'Explorer' series on iTunes.

ARRRGHHH YOU INTO PIRATES?

Pirates loved (raiding) Central America. A few sites to see include the following:

Anti-pirate castles Guatemala's El Castillo de San Felipe (p176) and Nicaragua's El Castillo (p511) on the Río San Juan were built to keep pirates' looting at bay.

Trujillo, Honduras (p401) Henry Morgan plundered it in 1643; the town got revenge by executing 'modern-day pirate' William Walker two centuries later.

Panama City Panamá Viejo got itself plundered by Henry Morgan in 1671, who paid a kind of respect to the 'pirate priest' at the Iglesia de San José (p654).

ex-FMLN guerrillas to its congress. On the other hand, the civil-war-era, right-wing leader of Guatemala, Ríos Montt, sought a term in congress in 2007, while a survivor of one of Montt's ordered raids, Maya writer Rigoberta Menchú, ran for president.

A key political issue for discussion is the Central American Free Trade Agreement (Cafta), an arrangement to open the local economies of Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic to US trade and investment. Cafta was set to go into effect by January 2007, but governments chose to drag their heels instead. Only El Salvador had changed local laws in line with the agreement in a timely manner, and Costa Rica (supposedly the USA's top ally in Central America) had yet to ratify the agreement, with protests erupting over the issue (signs at one San José rally proclaimed 'the north is invading us again').

A more welcome invasion is tourism. Despite the record-breaking damage of hurricanes to many popular destinations in 2005 (Stan killed 1620 people in Mexico, Guatemala and El Salvador, while Wilma amassed over US\$20 billion in damages, mostly in the tourist zones of the Yucatán), the numbers of travelers pouring into Central America have increased by double-digit percentages in the 2000s. Belize, for example, is booming, from almost zero annual cruise-ship visitors not long ago to a figure over twice its population. Cargo-carrying ships, meanwhile, have traveled through the Panama Canal without a hitch since the US transferred control of the canal to Panama in 1999.

This has pleasantly surprised many, enough so that in 2006 the nation overwhelmingly endorsed an ambitious US\$5 billion plan to expand canal operations.

HISTORY

Most believe the first Central Americans were peoples from Asia who migrated 20,000 or so years ago across the frozen Bering Strait from Russia to Alaska and down through the Americas. Others argue that seafaring Asians crossed to present-day California only about 11,000 years ago. Either way, things have gotten decidedly more tense in the last few thousand years. Ever cruel, Mother Nature has unleashed hurricanes, volcanic eruptions and mudslides, wrecking new settlements, while rival city-states battled each other. Then the Europeans showed up.

Europeans, Meet 'Americans'

By the time the first Europeans with shiny helmets arrived in Central America – Christopher Columbus (Cristóbal Colón to his Spanish crew) made it here in 1502 – the region's greatest civilizations had already dissipated into the jungle (see p31).

Most of the 'Indians' who did meet the Spanish lived in small tribes, as corn farmers or hunter-gatherers. Other than a few scattered highland towns, and larger ones at present-day Managua and Granada in Nicaragua, nothing here rivaled the power centers of the Aztecs or Incas of the time.

Thomas E Skidmore's *Modern Latin America* has a 48-page summary of Central America's contemporary history. Costa Rican Hector Perez-Brignoli's *A Brief History of Central America* is a readable 222-page overview of the region.

TOP FIVE BASTARDS

Many outsiders, not to mention local dictators, have wreaked havoc on countless Central Americans. Here are five contenders for the hall of shame:

- **Pedro Arias de Ávila** Spanish founder of Panama City who literally roasted many indigenous locals alive or fed them to the dogs.
- **Pedro de Alvarado** Spaniard whose burning alive of captives in the 1520s, including many conquered Guatemalan Quiché leaders, disturbed even Cortés, himself no nice guy.
- **William Walker** American bully in the 1850s who aided León, then declared himself president and tried to take over Central America (p447); fate (and justice) caught up with him at a firing squad in Trujillo, Honduras (p402).
- **Allan W Dulles** The CIA director who, in 1954, masterminded the coup against the Guatemalan government to protect US interests (which included bananas); despite massacres and oppression instigated by the installed government, the coup became a template for future CIA campaigns.
- **Ronald Reagan** US president of the 1980s who broke records for outside interference – backing Guatemalan death squads, the Salvadoran military junta, and Contras launching attacks from Honduras against Nicaragua's Sandinistas (p333).

Conquest & Colonization

The Spanish conquistadors – mostly poor, illiterate criminals sniffing out get-rich schemes – moved in independent factions, sometimes warring against each other. The first Spanish settlement in Central America was established in Panama in 1509, but further conquests were put on snooze. Instead, Panama served as a base for Francisco Pizarro's takeover of the Inca empire in Peru. Meanwhile, in February 1519, Hernán Cortés landed at the isle of Cozumel and led his savage attacks on Mexico to the north.

Also in 1519 Pedro Arias de Ávila settled Panama City and began a bloody trip north, which involved displaying incredible cruelty to the indigenous population. In 1524 he established León and Granada in today's Nicaragua, while Cortés' brutal lieutenant Pedro de Alvarado based his own takeover of the Guatemala and El Salvador areas. With control over the region up for grabs, the two forces inevitably clashed in present-day Honduras.

Amid this, indigenous tribes fought each other, the Spanish (though some fought *with* the Spanish against rival clans) and smallpox (in present-day Mexico about 90% of the indigenous population died in the first 75 years of Spanish occupation). Many who weren't killed became slaves.

Eventually 'Guatemala' (Central America, including Chiapas but not Panama) was established as part of the viceroyalty of Mexico (then called Nueva España). The indigenous population was subjected to violent rule, tempered slightly after pleas to King Carlos V of Spain by Dominican friar Bartolomé de Las Casas in 1542. A colonial capital was established at Antigua in 1543. After a 1773 earthquake destroyed it, a new capital was created at Guatemala City.

COLONIAL HISTORY – TIMELINE



Independence

Colonial trade restrictions and governments run exclusively by Spanish-born Spaniards eroded the patience of many criollos (people born in Latin America of Spanish parentage). The first Central American revolt, following Mexico's the previous year, flared in San Salvador in 1811 (led by priest José Matías Delgado and Manuel José Arce), but was quickly suppressed. By 1821 Mexico's viceroy (Agustín de Iturbide) defected to the rebels and Guatemala's leaders reluctantly signed the first acts of independence. Spain finally let go for good on September 15, 1821. Guatemala was annexed by Iturbide's forces; conservatives welcomed the union. But Delgado and Arce staged a brief revolt in El Salvador (and they even wanted to join the USA!).

Iturbide's reign was soon overthrown, and Central American states declared independence from Mexico in 1823 (Chiapas stayed with Mexico). The federation of five states – Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Costa Rica – led a brief, shaky existence (though they did manage to abolish slavery decades before the USA did). Arce became the first president, but succumbed to dictator tendencies and was overthrown. In 1837 a largely indigenous mob marched on Guatemala City and the federation dissolved in 1838, with the republics setting out on their own. See the History sections in individual country chapters for details on how they panned out.

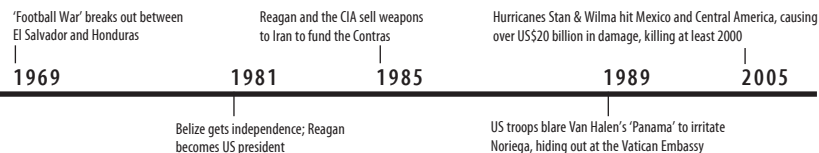
The USA & Central America

Starting in 1823 with the Monroe Doctrine (a 'civilizing' policy of 'America for the Americas'), the USA has butted in on many of Central America's affairs. William Walker notoriously tried to take over the region in the mid-19th century and spurred on the era of 'banana republics,' the unfortunate tag for some of the region's more bendable governments. As bananas started bringing in big money, the US-funded United Fruit Company took control in 1899. In 1954, when the Guatemalan government planned to break up large estates into small private plots, the CIA orchestrated an invasion from Honduras. Soon after, the Guatemala civil war broke out, leading to 200,000 deaths.

In the 1980s Ronald Reagan channeled US\$500 million to back the Salvadoran military, and illegally sold weapons to Iran to fund the Contras fight against the Nicaraguan Sandinistas.

JOIN THE 'MOUSTACHE EXPERIMENT'

Stick around and you'll notice many Central American men sport *bigotes* (moustaches) resembling fuzzy caterpillars. This book's authors strove to find out which country had the highest per-capita moustache tally, making random counts of 100 men in big cities and small towns of Central America. Turns out Guatemala and Panama (both with 10% tallies of mustached men; tssk!) are the most bare-faced, while only Nicaragua (57.7%) has a majority letting it grow. Other respectable counts include Mexico (44.5%), Honduras (36%), Costa Rica (35.5%) and El Salvador (30.5%), while Belize (14.5%) fell below the regional average of 29.8%. The search for truth can't stop here – let us know your tabulations.



THE CULTURE People

Along the northern Pacific slopes are heavy populations of indigenous groups (over half of Guatemala is Maya) and ladino or mestizo (person of mixed indigenous and Spanish ancestry). It changes gradually to the south, as European features become more noticeable. In Costa Rica criollos account for over 95% of the population. On the Caribbean, descendants of Africans dominate populations, while communities of Mennonites (in Belize) and Asians (throughout) add to the mix.

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

Today all Central American countries have groups, larger or smaller, of *indígena* (indigenous people). The largest surviving groups are the Maya communities of Guatemala, Belize, and Mexico's Chiapas and Yucatán Peninsula. Communities in the Guatemalan highlands (Chichicastenango and Lago de Atitlán, among others) and San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas, are known for traditional costumes, such as goat-fur vests and multistriped blouses.

In Honduras and Nicaragua are many other indigenous groups, including the Tolupanes (Jicaque), Pech (Paya), Tawahka (Sumo), Lenca, Chorti and Miskito peoples. Nicaragua is also home to the Rama. El Salvador has small numbers of Izalco and Pancho, descended from the Pipil. Costa Rica has few native inhabitants, but they include Boruca, Cabecar, Guatuso and Terraba. In Panama there are significant groups of Guaymí, Kuna and Chocóes, which are broken into two groups the Emberá and Wounaan, who still live deep in the Darién Gap. Panama's Kuna are a particular success story, as they run their area as an autonomous zone of 400 islands on the Caribbean coast and control all revenue and tourism investment.

Throughout the past 500 years, many indigenous groups have given up traditional dress and language for the cell phone-toting urban, ladino society. Others live as independently as governments will allow and transform what's introduced to fit into their own customs.

PEOPLE OF AFRICAN DESCENT

Black people inhabit much of the Caribbean coast and many are descended from Africans brought to the West Indies (primarily Jamaica) as slaves. Black Creoles (of mixed British and African descent) account for most of Belize's population. The Spanish brought many slaves to the region, especially to Panama, but most came from the Caribbean during the 19th century as laborers (not slaves) to work on banana plantations.

Along the northern coast, the Garífuna are another group, descended from West African slaves and Carib Indians. They were transplanted to Honduras in 1797 from the Caribbean island of St Vincent, eventually establishing communities in Belize, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua.

Arts

LITERATURE

Poetry's huge. Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío (1867–1916) lived a debauched life (eg waking up hungover and married), but spoke for much of Latin America with his own *modernismo*, political style. His provocative 'To Roosevelt' criticized the US president (Theodore, not Franklin) following the US invasion of Panama in 1903. He wrote: 'Our America, trembling with hurricanes, trembling with Love: zero men with Saxon eyes and barbarous souls, our America lives...Be careful.' *Stories & Poems/Cuentos y Poemas* is a bilingual collection of his works.

And We Sold the Rain: Contemporary Fiction from Central America (1988; edited by Rosario Santos) is a great collection of 20th-century writings from regional authors, with indigenous people a major theme.

Say indígena (indigenous) in Central America and not *indio* (Indian), a term which is outright offensive to some (particularly in Costa Rica).

To learn how women have increasingly added to the Central American literary scene, see *Writing Women in Central America: Gender & Fictionalization of History* by Laura Barbas-Rhoden.

LOCAL LORE

Understanding the traditions and lore of any region is key to understanding the heart and spirit of its people. Here are our favorites from each country:

- **Belize – Why mosquitoes buzz around ears** A Belizean legend tells of ‘Mosquito’ and ‘Wax’ being friends until Wax borrowed US\$5 and didn’t pay it back. Wax avoided Mosquito for months, until one day Mosquito found him and Wax jumped into the nearest hole to hide – an ear. Ever since, Mosquito buzzes around ears trying to collect the debt.
- **Costa Rica – La Negrita** Costa Rica’s mysterious ‘Black Virgin’ (now Costa Rica’s patron saint) is a statuette of an indigenous Virgin Mary, first found in 1635. Per tradition, whenever it’s taken it reappears at the spot it was originally, at the *Basílica de Nuestra Señora de Los Angeles*, built in her honor in 1824.
- **El Salvador – The Siguanaba** This mythical hottie seduces men, then turns grotesque and whorish, causing her victims to drop dead or go batty. Siguanaba travels with her mischievous little boy Cipitío, who approaches women washing at rivers and hurls rocks at them.
- **Guatemala – La Llorana** This is the legend of a beautiful peasant woman who, jilted by her lover, drowned his children in the local river. Grief-stricken, she then drowned herself. Late at night, near water, you can sometimes hear the woman wailing, bemoaning the loss of the children.
- **Honduras – Little Virgin** She’s just longer than your finger – but what a fuss she’s caused! Found centuries ago in a cornfield, the 6cm-tall wooden statue of the Virgin of Suyapa (see p350), is thought to have healing powers. When thieves seized her, there was a nationwide hunt until she was found in the men’s room of a Tegucigalpa restaurant (see p346).
- **Mexico – Chamula** Folks in the often-visited Maya village San Juan Chamula believe that foreigners – who they call ‘Germans’ – reach their village by ‘following the lightning,’ which ‘leads to gold.’ Visitors aren’t likely to see a newborn, as they are carefully kept out of strangers’ (including inhabitants of the next village) sight. If you should see one, the mother will ask you to kiss her baby *inmediante* to ensure no bad spirits are exchanged.
- **Nicaragua – La Carretanagua** This ghostly oxcart can be heard driving down pueblo streets at the darkest hours of the darkest nights. Driven by a skull-faced phantom, it makes a hideous racket and means someone in the village will die during the night. It is perhaps connected to folk memories of the depredations wrought by Spanish plunderers arriving with teams of oxen.
- **Panama – Teribe** According to the Teribe tribe, *indios conejos* (rabbit Indians) are nocturnal warriors who live deep in the jungle. They are pale white with stripes on their backs and dwarfish in size, like giant rabbits. Although they are nearly invincible under cover of night, they can easily be killed if ambushed while sleeping during the day.

El Salvador’s Roque Dalton was also a radical poet and was eventually executed by fellow communists, who may have wrongly taken him for a CIA spy. *Miguel Marmol* is a collection of his works in English.

Guatemalan Miguel Ángel Asturias (1899–1974) won the Nobel Prize for literature (1967) for his vilification of Latin American dictators in *El Señor Presidente*.

A Quiché Maya writer from Guatemala, Rigoberta Menchú (b 1959), won the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize for her incredible recount of the Guatemalan civil war in *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*. It later ignited a controversy when some elements of the book were claimed to be false (which she acknowledged). Menchú has received death threats for years, which kept her in exile, but she returned to make a bid for the presidency in late 2007.

MUSIC

Music is everywhere. Throughout much of the region everyone seems to love the xylophone-like marimba, proudly believed to be a Guatemalan invention. A Maya instrument, the *chirimía* (like an oboe) can still be heard in churches in the Guatemalan highlands. Salsa is huge everywhere, with big bands frequently playing outdoor shows for late-night plaza-packing crowds. A famous salsa singer is Panamanian Ruben Blades (now the country’s minister of tourism), though perhaps better known for his acting in films such as *Once Upon a Time in Mexico*.

In recent years, reggae and other Afro-Caribbean sounds have increasingly spilled out from the Caribbean coastline to more stereotypes throughout the region. The Garífuna’s drum-heavy traditional music, called *punta*, is made with conch shells, maracas and serious hip-shaking; it’s based on West African traditions.

Religion

Roman Catholicism, introduced by the Spaniards, has since been Central America’s principal religion, while Protestant sects have been predominant in British-influenced Caribbean areas. Things are tipping more toward Protestantism in the past couple decades, however, as waves of translated Bible-toting missionaries representing various evangelical religions (as well as Jehovah’s Witnesses, Mennonites, Mormons and Seventh-Day Adventists) are coming on humanitarian projects. The Church of Scientology even opened a location in Managua. Some missionaries go to simply build schools, clinics or help rebuild after a natural disaster; many programs, however, openly hope to convert an *evangelico* (as non-Catholic converts are called) or two. Some missionaries sermonize in plazas, criticize the ‘unbelief’ of ‘ancestral worship’ and keep tabs on millions of ‘unreached people.’

Ethnic groups, however, continue to practice and preserve their traditional religions, sometimes fused with Catholicism. Maya beliefs and folk remedies, for example, have long been ‘tolerated’ by Catholic priests. Here, animist beliefs and chicken sacrifices freely merge with the (occasional moonshine-drinking) saints. The Garífuna of the region’s Caribbean coastal areas continue to practice their traditional African-based religion, emphasizing the worship of ancestral spirits, in addition to Christianity.

ENVIRONMENT

The Land

Considering its diversity, Central America is remarkably wee, measuring just 523,780 sq km (about the size of France or Texas; about 2% of Latin America) with never more than 280km separating the Caribbean Sea and Pacific Ocean.

Created from four shifting tectonic plates over millions of years, Central America is the new kid on the block. As the world’s major continental plates were slowly drifting into current positions from the Pangea land mass, this region surfaced from the sea and somersaulted snugly as a skinny, altruistic, 2400km land bridge between the two bigger Americas. Central America’s two major plates (Cocos and Caribbean) still go at it, colliding at 10cm per year (geological light speed). Some day, far off, Central America may even split into two.

All that tectonic action helped create 300-or-so volcanoes. Central America’s among the world’s most active volcano zones; Guatemala’s Volcán Fuego is one of the fieriest. Many volcanoes burp lava or ash on a regular basis, and bigger eruptions occur. Even ‘extinct’ ones sometimes erupt, as Costa Rica’s Volcán Irazú did in 1963. El Salvador’s Volcán Izalco emerged

Good times to hear Garífuna’s *punta* music and dance are at Honduras’ festivals (p384) and Belize’s Garífuna Settlement Day (November 19; p250).

Borders are not always set in stone. A recent maritime-border dispute off the Caribbean coast between Nicaragua and Honduras went as far as a UN court in early 2007.

from ground level to its 1910m apex in the past 250 years. (Note to worried moms: none of Central America's volcanoes made the Top 20 list of death by natural disaster.)

Earthquakes rock the region as well. Over the years, San Salvador has been rebuilt nine times, and Antigua (Guatemala) has still not fully recovered from its 1773 quake.

Several cordilleras (mountain ranges) stretch for hundreds of kilometers down the Central American strip, broken by valleys and basins with fertile volcanic soil. Narrow, slightly sloping plains run along the coasts. When hurricanes or tidal waves hit, mudslides are common.

Wildlife

Central America's diverse and abundant animal and plant species owes much to the region's bridge position between North and South America. Hundreds of continental runaways and migrators, such as jaguars and oak trees, have spilled into Central America – and stuck around.

ANIMALS

Central America has 7% of the world's species on just 0.5% of the world's land mass. Costa Rica and Belize, in particular, are known for their abundant wildlife.

Many mammals can be discovered in the jungle: monkeys (spider, howler, squirrel), cats (jaguars, pumas, ocelots), sloth, anteaters, bats and agoutis (simply fantastic creatures). Even more impressive are the number of birds that live or migrate here. Over 900 species have been recorded in Panama alone. The many birds of the region include toucans, macaws, parrots, harpy eagles and hummingbirds. Lucky visitors can spot a quetzal (*ket-sal*), the national bird (and inspiration for the name of the currency) of Guatemala and an important Maya symbol. These 35cm-long birds have bright green, red and white feathers; the March-to-June breeding season is the easiest time to spot one. (Louie Irby Davis' *A Field Guide to the Birds of Mexico and Central America* is a great birding guide.)

The areas in and around rivers, lakes and coastlines are home to many fish species. Amphibians and reptiles include sea, river and land turtles, crocodiles, frogs (watch out for the poisonous arrow frog) and iguanas.

Only a few of the many snake species are poisonous, notably the shy and tiny coral snake and large *barba amarilla* (or fer-de-lance). Some spiders such as the tarantula can be as big as a person's face.

Deforestation and hunting have left a mark on many species, such as the quetzal, with some species facing extinction.

PLANTS

There are five major types of vegetation zones in Central America, all influenced by differing altitudes, climates and soils.

On the Caribbean coast, up to 850m, tropical rain forest has canopies of tall trees and lush ground cover. The Pacific coastal strip (and northern Belize) is home to tropical dry forest, with trees and shrubs parched brown during the dry season.

Higher up, from 850m to 1650m, the cooler climate is home to a mixed upland forest of evergreens, pines and deciduous oaks. One of the loveliest terrains, just higher up again, is the cloud forest. The extreme humidity helps tall trees from drying out, which protect an herb- and moss-covered floor from direct sunlight.

A few areas above 3000m have alpine vegetation, with short grasses (such as the Chilean *páramo* in Costa Rica) and flowering herbs.

If you see a turtle nesting site, do not startle the fragile newborn by flashing your camera in its face – even if operators say it's OK, it is *not*.

Garrobo (www.garrobo.org) is a great site devoted to the Central American environment. Volcano freaks can access photos and updated details at www.rci.rutgers.edu/~carr.

National Parks & Reserves

Central America has some 250 national parks, nature reserves and other protected areas. The most remote parks – such as Reserva de Biósfera Maya that comprises much of northern Guatemala – include vast areas with no infrastructure. Meanwhile, some of the most popular parks (such as Costa Rica's Parque Nacional Manuel Antonio) are touristed to the point of threatening the environment.

Environmental Issues

Central America's position between two oceans (and their hurricanes and tropical storms) makes its environment particularly vulnerable. Humans have an impact too. Deforestation of tropical rain forest – the 'lungs of the planet' – continues at a reckless pace. In 1950 about 60% of Central America was covered by tropical forest. About half that remains forested today. Some 95% of El Salvador's original forest is gone, while Guatemala reportedly clears 3% to 5% of its Reserva de Biósfera Maya (in El Petén) annually. Hamburgers are as much to blame as timber, as the expansion of livestock farms increases.

Scientists predict that millions of additional species remains undiscovered, with some plant species potentially important for pharmaceutical purposes. The forests are also still home to indigenous peoples, such as the Miskito in Honduras and Nicaragua, and the Choco of Panama. In addition, deforestation has led to soil erosion, which results in severe flooding and mudslides, as evidenced by Hurricane Stan in 2005.

Occasionally new problems are not our fault, such as in early 2007, when a waterborne fungal disease wiped out several amphibian groups in Panama, including the rockhopper frog.

Meanwhile ecotourism remains a buzz word heard by all of Central American governments. Organizations of national parks and reserves are devoted to help conserve and protect natural environments, but in some cases 'ecotourism' is going too far, developing to the point of harming what it is designed to protect.

However, Central America still has some wilderness areas where the forests are largely unexplored, such as the Darién region of Panama.

THE MAYA

It's not a contest, but of the New World's three biggest pre-Columbian civilizations (Aztec, Inca and Maya), Maya is usually considered the greatest. During its peak (around AD 750), possibly 10 million people thrived in stone cities of up to 200,000 inhabitants. The Maya's turf sprawled over much of present-day southern Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador and Honduras (making up the Ruta Maya). The Maya elite used hieroglyphs to record battles, reigns, beliefs and precise planetary movements. Atop towering blood-red pyramids were vaulted temples adorned with bas-relief tributes to the gods. Many Maya from neighboring cities who saw these impressive pyramids were soon tortured and executed: the captured were not treated kindly.

Much remains unknown of the Maya, however. New theories are rolled out regularly, particularly about why, at the peak of power, the Maya world suddenly collapsed.

History

During the Maya pre-Classic period (2000 BC–AD 250), the first prototypes for the great art to come were drafted at cities such as the giant El Mirador (Guatemala). Two masterful calendars were developed: a 260-day year,

A few worthy books include *The Good Alternative Travel Guide*, Mark Mann's *The Community Tourism Guide* and Adrian Forsyth's entertaining *Tropical Nature: Life & Death in the Rain Forests of Central & South America*.

Put in a little time to help the environment by volunteering. Near Tikal, help with local wildlife projects (see p189). In Costa Rica, help sea turtle populations by monitoring nesting sites (p631). See p733 for more on volunteering.

'I blame two things for the recent decay of the local Mayan traditions: cell phones and missionaries.'

SAN CRISTOBAL DE LAS CASAS, MEXICO, RESIDENT

DID APOCALYPTO GET IT RIGHT?

Of all people, Mel Gibson became the first Hollywood hotshot to put the Maya on the big screen. Watching *Apocalypto* (2006) – shot in Yucatec language in Veracruz, Mexico and also Costa Rica (neither Maya areas) – certainly affects how you'll see the ruins on your travels, with its images of elaborately pierced and tattooed villagers, and limestone-covered workers gathering materials to build pyramids.

But some viewers haven't been happy.

The Guatemalan 'commissioner of racism' called the film racist, for implying that the collapsing Maya 'deserved rescue' by the Spanish.

Others lamented Mel's extravagant use of sacrifice – which, to be fair, was (at some level) a part of Maya life (see Bonampak's blood-curdling murals; p62). More problematic for some purists is that the film set a Classic-era-looking city in the post-Classic time period, and that the flat Yucatán hardly resembles the mountainous settings from scenes that were filmed in Costa Rica.

For more on the making of the film, check out Luke Dittrich's funny piece for *Esquire* magazine (www.esquire.com).

and a 365-day *haab* ('vague' year), with five dreaded unlucky days at the end of 18 20-day months. The earliest known use of the calendar dates from 36 BC.

Maya cities as we know them best took shape during the Classic period (AD 250–900), when Palenque, Tikal, Cobá and Copán flourished. Pyramids skyrocketed, topped with ornate stone roof combs, not the thatched huts atop most central Mexican sites.

Then, in the late Classic period (800–900), came the collapse. Cities were abandoned, population numbers diminished; those who remained lived in small hut communities scattered about the region. Common theories for what happened include overpopulation, war between city-states, revolution and drought.

Most post-Classic (900–1500) activity occurred in the Yucatán (notably Chichén Itzá), based on a union of overtaken Maya and their new lords from the north, the Toltecs.

At the time of the Spanish conquest, Tulum was still occupied, but the heyday of Maya civilization was clearly past, with the giant cities lost in jungle. Still, the weakened Maya put up one of the toughest resistances to the Spanish in the Americas.

Beliefs & Rituals

According to the Popul Vuh (aka the 'Maya Bible'), which was written post-conquest by Quiché Maya, it took the great god K'ucumatz three tries to get humans right. The first two failures involved making people from mud then wood, before humans were successfully made with ground corn and water.

Corn, or maize, has always played a huge role for the Maya. Some even tattooed their faces to resemble kernels. A surprising crucifix-like shape

on monuments actually symbolizes corn husks. Even now, some Catholic churches have altars to maize.

Another part of worship was sacrifice, which wasn't limited to slaves and captured foes; children, dogs and squirrels were also offerings for the many Maya gods. Some ceremonies involved painful rituals such as women slicing their tongues and threading them with thorn-studded rope, or men jabbing needles into their penises.

Other painful procedures were merely cosmetic, such as tying flat boards to infants in order to flatten foreheads. Some Maya skulls have been found with hundreds of small holes in them.

Modern Currents

Some visitors are surprised to learn that the Maya are very much alive in northern Central America and southern Mexico, rebounding from the disease and destruction the European colonists introduced 500 years ago. The guttural languages, such as Yucatec and Quiché, are still widely spoken, and populations are growing. Estimates suggest there are six million Maya today. Guatemala is said to be 60% Maya, and Mexico's biggest indigenous population is that of the Yucatec in the Yucatán Peninsula.

These population figures, however, don't mean the struggle for equality ended with independence from Spain in 1821. In 1847 the War of the Castes erupted in the Yucatán, with Maya rebels nearly driving out whites for good. More recently, the Guatemalan Civil War in the 1980s saw some 400 Maya villages wiped out by government troops and paramilitaries. In Chiapas in 1994, a guerrilla force of chiefly Tzotzil and Tzeltal Maya kicked off the Zapatista 'revolution' – seeking more say in how public land is used in the wake of Nafta (North American Free Trade Agreement).

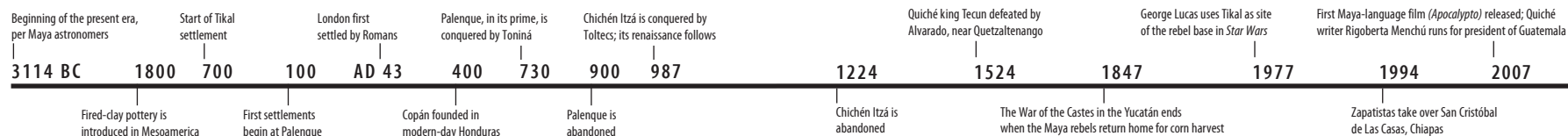
Over the generations, many alien products and ideologies (coffee, Coca-Cola, Catholicism, marimba etc) have been absorbed into daily life, without completely replacing traditional ways and beliefs. For generations, the Chamula community outside San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Mexico, used *chicha* (in Mexico, a corn-based drink) to help them burp out evil spirits in holy places; after the Spanish introduced Catholicism, and the Americans Coca-Cola, the Chamula simply began using bottles of the fizzy soda in cathedrals where, on occasion, a chicken is sacrificed.

The so-called 'last unconquered tribe' of the Maya are the 700-or-so Lacandón who live in primitive communities in Chiapas' jungles in south Mexico. After so much resistance, many of these Maya, known for their long hair with bangs and white robes, are changing their religious beliefs, largely the result of missionaries.

According to the Maya calendar, time is cyclical and divided into 5200-year *kalpas* (eras) that end in destruction. The present era is set to end, by global annihilation, on December 23, 2012.

READING UP ON MAYA HISTORY

The best introduction to Maya history is Mayanist Michael D Coe's enduring *The Maya*, while his surprisingly engaging *Breaking the Maya Code* reviews the wacky, bitchy world of Mayanists. Much of what we do know about the Maya comes from a Spaniard who destroyed hundreds of priceless Maya books and idols in the 16th century. Friar Diego de Landa, a Franciscan, was ordered by his superiors to write a detailed book on Maya customs and took a stab at a Maya alphabet. Much is described in his *Yucatán Before and After the Conquest*.

THE MAYA – TIMELINE

The Authors



ROBERT REID

Coordinating Author, Mexico's Yucatán & Chiapas

Raised in Oklahoma, Robert has considered Mexico his second home since he got a clay sun god at Teotihuacán when he was five. He's since returned 13 times, once vomiting in a sombrero in a Puerto Vallarta taxi, and other times pursuing the ever-elusive *español* while staying with inspiring families in Guanajuato, San Cristóbal de Las Casas and Mexico City. After five years at Lonely Planet, Robert now writes from his apartment in Brooklyn. See photos from his trips at www.robertreid.info.



JOLYON ATTWOOLL

Honduras

Jolyon went to all sorts of lengths to fund his first trip to Central America, including spending a wintry morning playing sponsored tiddlywinks up London's Parliament Hill. He made it, both up the hill and to the continent, where he volunteered in the beautiful Guatemalan highlands. First dipping into Honduras in 2002, he seized the chance to see the majestic Copán Ruinas and spot angel fish in West Bay. Jolyon has also contributed to Lonely Planet's *Chile, England* and *Sydney* guides.



MATTHEW D FIRESTONE

Panama

Matt is a biological anthropologist and epidemiologist, though he prefers moonlighting as a freelance travel writer. His first visit to Panama was in 2001 during a spring break from college. While his classmates were partying in Panama City, Florida, Matt was dining on *tapas* and dancing salsa in Panama City, Panama. Matt now knows how to cook a mean ceviche and his four-step ain't half bad. The secret to both is simple – spice things up with diced habanero chiles or a few rounds of rum and coke with lime.



CAROLYN MCCARTHY

Costa Rica & El Salvador

Carolyn was born and bred a gringa but has spent the last nine years traveling the Americas from Alaska to Tierra del Fuego. This trip introduced her to the ecstasy of surfing and the intrigue of traveling with an ex-guerilla guide. She contributes frequently to the column *Travels with Lonely Planet* and has coauthored *South America on a Shoestring* and *Ecuador & the Galapagos Islands*. She lives in Chile, where she guides treks and writes on pioneer Patagonia. Her blog is www.carolynswildblueyonder.blogspot.com.

LONELY PLANET AUTHORS

Why is our travel information the best in the world? It's simple: our authors are independent, dedicated travellers. They don't research using just the Internet or phone, and they don't take freebies in exchange for positive coverage. They travel widely, to all the popular spots and off the beaten track. They personally visit thousands of hotels, restaurants, cafés, bars, galleries, palaces, museums and more – and they take pride in getting all the details right, and telling it how it is. For more, see the authors section on www.lonelyplanet.com.



ANDY SYMINGTON

Nicaragua

Andy hails from Australia and got his first sniff of the sulphur of a Central American volcano a decade ago. From his base in northern Spain, he hops across the Atlantic whenever humanly possible for more brimstone and piping-hot *nacatamales* (bundles of cornmeal, pork, vegetables and herbs wrapped in banana leaf). Andy has authored many guidebooks, including several Lonely Planet titles.



LUCAS VIDGEN

Guatemala & Belize

Lucas has been traveling and working in Latin America for more than a decade. He lives in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, where he is a director of the NGO *EntreMundos* and publishes the city's leading culture and nightlife magazine, *XelaWho*. Lucas contributed to the previous edition of *Central America on a Shoestring*, as well as *Guatemala, Belize & Yucatán, Argentina* and *South America on a Shoestring*. He is the sole author of the *Guatemala* country guide. His Spanish is OK, but he misses potato cakes and his mum.

CONTRIBUTING AUTHOR

Dr David Goldberg wrote the Health chapter. He completed his training in internal medicine and infectious disease at Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center in New York City, where he also served as voluntary faculty. At present, he is an infectious-diseases specialist in Scarsdale, New York, and the editor-in-chief of www.mdtravelhealth.com.

© Lonely Planet Publications. To make it easier for you to use, access to this chapter is not digitally restricted. In return, we think it's fair to ask you to use it for personal, non-commercial purposes only. In other words, please don't upload this chapter to a peer-to-peer site, mass email it to everyone you know, or resell it. See the terms and conditions on our site for a longer way of saying the above – 'Do the right thing with our content.'