

La Moskitia



Life in La Moskitia begins at dawn, the new-day's sun kicking off a whirling dervish of activity under the verdant rainforest canopy to the west and out on the great pine savannah to the east. Jaguars are finishing up the night hunt as the rest of the forest dwellers – the tapirs and toucans, monkeys and macaws – begin their day of foraging. Along the numerous twisted rivers and broad, salt-water lagoons that make this landscape so unique, the rugged frontiersmen also begin their day, heading out to fish or tend their crops as many have done for centuries. Among the five distinct ethnic groups that call this land home, there are few hard-won commonalities: a proximity to the land – to the wild – that brings each community together.

Taking on a trip to the 'Mosquito Coast' is no small task – it costs a lot of money, you may wait for several days for a boat or a plane, and normal-day creature comforts that we now take for granted seem a lifetime away. But with new trails, new hotels and new routes opening up, it's much easier to visit today than it has ever been.

Generally speaking, a trip will take at least five days and could last for several months. The most visited route takes you by land and water to the Laguna de Ibans, and into the vast Reserva de la Biósfera del Río Plátano. Less visited even still are the chalkboard-flat grassland savannahs of eastern Moskitia. It's tough travel, and in that lies the biggest draw: a chance to get back to the beginning.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Visit La Moskitia the hard way, gliding past Tawahka villages as you journey down the **Río Patuca** (p252) on a 10-day cruise
- Head into the wilds of this massive swath of rainforest from **Las Marias** (p243), visiting the petroglyphs at **Walpaulban Sirpi** (p246) or tromping out on a three-day journey to **Pico Dama** (p246)
- Cut your teeth with a few Miskitu phrases as you visit with folks in the tranquil villages of **Cocobila** (p241), **Rais Ta** (p241) and **Belén** (p241)
- Discover the modern legacy of the Garífuna in traditional villages such as **Plaplaya** (p240)
- Leave the tourist trail, and this guidebook, behind as you forge new trails into the wilds of this last great frontier



HISTORY

La Moskitia was inhabited as long as 3000 years ago by Chibcha-speaking Amerindians, who migrated here from present-day South America. Today's Pech and Tawahka indigenous groups are descended from those early migrants, and speak variations of Chibcha dialects. The pre-Hispanic population reached its peak between AD 800 and 1200, around the time groups to the west, especially the Maya, were in near collapse.

Christopher Columbus was the first European to reach La Moskitia, on his fourth and last voyage in 1502. Sailing east from the Bay Islands, he landed briefly near the mouth of a large river – which one is unknown, though it was likely the Patuca or the Sico – before rounding the cape (which he dubbed Cabo Gracias a Dios, or 'Thank God Cape,' reportedly after weathering a fierce storm). But the unforgiving terrain and environment of La Moskitia prevented any serious exploration for over a century. A cursory exploration in 1564 was not followed up until 1607 and 1609, and the first church – the point of early expeditions – was not founded until 1610. However, that church, and another founded a year later, were both sacked and burned and their occupants killed by Tawahka Indians. It took another 80 years for Spanish missionaries (supported by Spanish troops) to gain a foothold in the jungle.

In the 1700s, Spanish influence waned as that of English pirates (and some Dutch and French) rose. The slow-moving Spanish galleons laden with precious metals and raw materials made easy targets for pirates, who found refuge in La Moskitia's lagoons and river inlets. The English made little attempt to convert the indigenous people to Christianity – one supposes the pirates were not themselves big church-goers – but rather formed alliances with them against the Spanish. In fact, it was arming one group with muskets that gave rise to the term *mosqueteros* and eventually 'Miskitu' and 'Moskitia,' according to many historians.

Britain maintained control over eastern Honduras until 1786 when, through a treaty with Spain, it essentially traded La Moskitia for present-day Belize. But having gained nominal control of the territory, Spain did little to exert any real influence there. The status of the colony was in constant flux: the Central American Federation came and

went, and a meddlesome British government briefly recognized La Moskitia as a sovereign nation, before Honduras finally became an independent republic in 1838. Through it all, life in La Moskitia stayed relatively unchanged. Moravian missionaries began arriving in the late 1920s, setting up schools, clinics and churches. The Honduran government didn't take up true civic responsibility in La Moskitia until the 1950s, around the same time indigenous rights organizations began forming to focus on land rights and other issues.

In the 1980s, La Moskitia was used as a base for the Contra War, the US-supported effort to unseat the new Sandinista government in Nicaragua. Puerto Lempira had major military installations, as did many of the small border towns. Countless indigenous people, especially Miskitus, whose traditional lands spanned the Honduran-Nicaraguan border, were killed and displaced during the conflict.

PEOPLE

With five distinct ethnic groups – Miskitu, Pech, Garifuna, Tawahka and ladino – La Moskitia is arguably the most culturally diverse region in the country. The single largest ethnic group in the region is the Miskitu, whose present members arose from a mixing of a landed indigenous group and escaped African slaves, and later English pirates. Historically, they occupied areas along the coast and around La Moskitia's three large lagoons, as well as along the Río Coco. They form the majority in all of the towns frequented by travelers, including Brus Laguna, Belén, Rais Ta, Ahuas, Wampusirpi, and a large part of Las Marías.

Another group, the Pech, once occupied large parts of what is now the Reserva de la Biosfera del Río Plátano, and as far south as the Sierra de Agalta mountains in Olancho and west to the Valle de Aguán. However, a longtime rivalry with the Miskitus along the coast, and encroachment by ladino farmers in Olancho, squeezed the Pech into the middle reaches of the Río Plátano, where they remain today. Even Las Marías, once a vital Pech village, now has a large number of Miskitu residents thanks to migration and intermarriage. In 1990, about 40 Pech people moved from Olancho to Las Marías, in part to re-establish Pech presence in the area.