

Central America Directory

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This chapter provides general information on Central America. Country-specific details are included in the Directory at the back of each country chapter. Also, each country title page displays 'key facts' information, such as travel tips and popular border crossings.

ACCOMMODATIONS

Central America's sleeping options range from thin-wall sand-floor shacks to luxury beach resorts. This book focuses on budget accommodations such as hostels, *casas de huéspedes* (guesthouses) with fan-cooled rooms and shared bathrooms, lean-to *cabañas* (bungalows) on a beach, or simply trees to hang a hammock from. Some mid-range choices and worthy splurges are also included.

BOOK YOUR STAY ONLINE

For more accommodations reviews and recommendations by Lonely Planet authors, check out the online booking service at www.lonelyplanet.com/hotels. You'll find the true, insider low-down on the best places to stay. Reviews are thorough and independent. Best of all, you can book online.

Unless otherwise noted, prices listed in the book reflect high-season rates (roughly July and August, Christmas to Easter) and include applicable national taxes. Prices do change; use the prices in this book as a gauge, not law. Showing the price listed in the book is a far less successful tactic to getting a lower rate than simply asking for a discount. When business is slow or over a several-night stay, it's often possible to get a cheaper rate. Be prepared to take 'no' for an answer.

Generally Nicaragua, Honduras and Guatemala are the cheapest countries, Mexico and Belize (and many beach destinations), the most expensive. Features like a private bathroom, hot water and air-con jack up prices. Generally, hostels are around US\$7 to US\$15 per person, and OK hotels (with shared bathroom and fan) are about US\$20 to US\$40 per double in the bulk of Central America.

Reservations are not possible at many places, much less needed. Key exceptions are tourist areas during peak season, particularly during *Semana Santa* (Easter Week) and the week between Christmas and New Year's, when locals are traveling around the region too.

Camping

Organized campgrounds aren't commonly found in the region. If you plan on camping, bring your own gear – and bug repellent. Facilities at campgrounds can vary: some have fire pits, latrines and water. Others have *nada*. Nothing.

Some hostels set aside areas for campers. Some national parks and reserves (particularly in Costa Rica) have basic facilities, but they can be hit-and-miss – sometimes packed and noisy. Prices range from US\$5 to US\$10 per

person. In some places it's feasible to ask to camp on private land.

Guesthouses & Hotels

The most popular places to stay are the cheap guesthouses and hotels. Many are small (10 or so rooms) and family-run, and (depending on the family) can be fun, attractive and offer cheap deals that practically plead for another night. That said, you can also expect a night or two on a lumpy bed with smeared mosquito remains on the walls and a smelly leaky-faucet shower (thankfully) down the hall.

Most rooms have a fan and shared bathroom. Many do not provide a towel or soap. Rooms with air-con and TV (generally US\$20 and up) start at double the price of a room with fan. Generally breakfast is not included in the overnight rate.

'Hot water' can be lukewarm and working only at certain hours of the day. Beware of the electric shower: a cold-water shower-head juiced by an electric heating element. Don't touch it, or anything metal, while in the shower or you may get a shock.

Used toilet paper should be placed in the receptacle provided.

We've done our best to avoid including places used by the 'hourly' crowd or prostitutes. If you stumble on some we've included, please let us know.

Hammocks & Bungalows

Sleeping in a hammock can make for a breezier night than sleeping in a stuffy room. Many beach towns have hammock rooms or areas for the same price as a dorm. Beach *cabañas* (or *cabinas*) provide memorable stays on the beach or in the jungle. Many of these are simple thatched-roof huts with a dirt or sand floor; others are electrified deals, with fans and fine decor.

Homestays

Nothing offers more insight into local culture than staying with a local family. In towns with Spanish-language school scenes, such as Antigua or Quetzaltenango in Guatemala, or Granada in Nicaragua, schools can arrange homestays for their students. Many can even arrange for you to stay with a family for a week or longer, even if you're not studying. Homestays can be arranged in many other towns as well. A week's stay ranges from US\$70 to US\$150 per person, including most

meals. See Courses in individual towns or in the country Directory for more information.

Hostels

Hostels are found throughout Central America, and generally charge around US\$7 to US\$15 for a bunk, though your Hostelling International (HI) membership isn't particularly useful here, as many hostels are independently run. Mexico and Costa Rica are exceptions, with many HI-affiliated hostels.

ACTIVITIES

Coastal fun is Central America's most popular draw for tourists: the Pacific is booming on surfers' itineraries, while the Caribbean has the best diving and most of the white-sand beaches. Mountains and volcanoes run through most of the region, offering many compelling (and often tough) hiking and cycling options.

See also p17 for an activity-based itinerary.

Canopy Tours

These zip-line trips sliding over jungle and mountains may not be the most natural of Central American activities, but you can at least tickle your inner Tarzan. Costs average US\$45. You'll find opportunities all over Costa Rica, including in Monteverde (p571). In Honduras the options are at La Ceiba (p397) or the Garífuna villages nearby (p402). You can also zip down Volcán Mombacho outside Granada, Nicaragua (p490).

Cycling

Many shops rent bicycles for local exploring. Some offer guided cycling trips – such as to Maya villages from San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Mexico (p43), and coffee plantations or ridge rides from Antigua, Guatemala (p109). Cycling is also a fine way to explore local villages in other countries, though it is best to bring your own bike for these trips (along with proof that you own the bike).

See p731 for a quick rundown on the joys and pitfalls of cycling your way around the region.

Diving & Snorkeling

Some of Latin America's (and the world's) finest diving and snorkeling spots are found along the barrier reefs off Central America's Caribbean shores. Sites up and down the coast – from Mexico to Panama – offer rich marine life, sunken ships and deep holes. Some of the