

El Salvador

El Salvador is Central America's smallest, most densely populated country, with the region's largest economy and its fewest foreign tourists. Once only a trickle of headstrong surfers and foreign correspondents passed through its rigorous border posts, but now a new breed of traveler is pushing through in search of an authentic experience in an undervisited land.

El Salvador is a perennial tease. Glimpses of tropical paradise, lush tracts of pre-industrial national park lands, colonial splendor astride pristine volcanic lakes, searing colors and a fierce creative vision sit quietly in the shadows of an indomitable local pride. Here you'll find a glorious coastline, a buzzing culture-clad capital, hard-core war tourism and small-town charm by the plaza-load.

Salvadorans themselves are increasingly content to return home from prolonged stints abroad, the once enviable rite of passage now cut short by global economics and a growing sentiment that home might just be where the fresh start is.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 21,040 sq km (smallest in Central America)
- **Budget** US\$25 to US\$30 per day
- **Capital** San Salvador
- **Costs** Budget hotel US\$10, bottle of beer US\$1.50, three-hour bus ride US\$1.60, bean-and-cheese *pupusa* US\$0.30, surf-board rental US\$10 per day
- **Country Code** ☎ 503
- **Languages** Spanish, Nahuat
- **Money** US dollar (US\$)
- **Population** 6.7 million (most populated in Central America)
- **Seasons** Dry (November to April), wet (May to October)
- **Time** GMT minus six hours, no daylight saving time



TRAVEL HINTS

If you want to blend in with locals, travel with a duffel bag and wear neat clothes and long pants. A simple, '*Buenos días/buenas tardes. ¿Como va?*' (Good morning/afternoon. How's it going?) launches any encounter (in the market, a hotel or elsewhere) the right way. It might open doors.

OVERLAND ROUTES

From Guatemala, enter through Anguiatú, San Cristóbal or La Hachadura. From Honduras, El Poy or El Amatillo are best; you can exit El Salvador via Perquín, but you cannot enter there.

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Ruta de las Flores** (p303) Charge the western highlands: hiking *fincas* (plantations), stepping into hot springs and chowing at the weekend food fairs.
- **La Costa del Bálsamo** (p293) Ride great breaks, string a hammock under the palms and soak up the lax atmosphere.
- **Parque Nacional Imposible** (p306) Steal stunning ridgetop views and splash in river pools, while hiking from the park's remote backdoor.
- **Suchitoto** (p319) Scope the weekend arts scene with the hip *capitalinos* in El Salvador's unofficial cultural capital.
- **San Salvador** (p277) Put your hands in the air for Central America's finest nightlife and museums.
- **Off the beaten track** (p317) Put your trust in an ex-guerrilla guide while exploring the rugged territory of the former FMLN stronghold of Perquín.

CURRENT EVENTS

Political change hit El Salvador in March 2009 when the left-wing Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN) party – led by former TV journalist Mauricio Funes – rose to power for the first time since its inception as a guerrilla resistance movement. This represented a major victory for democratic process and reconciliation in the country, but whether the Funes administration can live up to its promises of political transparency and widespread social change remains to be seen. A late-2009 split within the opposition Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (Arena) party ensured the short-term future of the new government looks steady. A January 2010 formal apology for the government's role in past atrocities – and full compliance in external investigations – is a step in the right direction.

Despite a 10% slump in 2009, the economy is still too reliant on remittances from abroad (one fifth of the national economy) – rising interest rates have made it more difficult for the American dream to be replicated further south. Microfinance institutions are set to play a bigger role in enabling Salvadorans to better invest their hard-earned overseas capital.

Natural disasters continue to plague the country. In 2005, Hurricane Stan left thousands homeless and killed 69, only days after Volcán Santa Ana erupted, triggering landslides and ruining coffee and other crops. Then in November 2009 the remnants of Hurricane Ida saw 14in of rain drop on central El Salvador in under 24 hours. Two hundred people were killed in the floods, and the re-

sulting loss of homes and farmland illustrated the vulnerability of the nation's poor.

HISTORY Traders & Raiders

Paleo-Indian peoples populated El Salvador as early as 10,000 years ago, literally leaving their mark with cave paintings in modern Morazán. Around 2000 BC the Olmecs followed, leaving as their legacy the Olmec Boulder, a giant head sculpture similar to those from Mexico, found near Casa Blanca.

El Salvador was once a key regional trading center. Archaeological remains reveal diverse influences, from Pipil, Teotihuacan and Maya in the west to Lenca, Chorti and Pok'omama in the east. The step pyramid ruins at Tazumal, San Andrés and Casa Blanca show 3000 years of nearly constant pre-Hispanic habitation.

When Spanish conquistador Pedro de Alvarado arrived in 1524, he saw a country dominated by Pipils, descendants of Toltecs and Aztecs. These northern peoples (from modern-day Mexico) dubbed their home Cuscatlán, 'Land of Jewels.' Their maize-based farming economy flourished enough to support several cities and a sophisticated culture with pursuits that included hieroglyphics, astronomy and mathematics. Their dialect is related to modern Nahuatl.

From Indigo to Independence

Spanish rule started with a year-long struggle against the Pipil. The Spaniards prevailed and laid claim to the land, transforming it into plantations of cotton, balsam and indigo. Agriculture boomed throughout the 1700s,