



MARGIE POLITZER

# Responsible Travel

Central America overflows with those incredible ‘What? Where? You did what?’ places that can, well, change your life. But visitors can bring changes for the destinations too – some of which are not good. In the last 50 years, the region has seen the erosion of traditional customs, deforestation, and rising illicit drug use and prostitution. Sometimes tourism is a culprit. Ecotourism has caught on, particularly in Costa Rica, saving many hectares of forest from the saw. Still, ecotourism is an often abused buzzword. Here are a few ways to help.

## TIPS

- **Go overland** Take buses, not planes – if coming from the USA, consider taking a bus across Mexico.
- **Give right** Handouts to kids encourage begging; give directly to schools or clinics instead.
- **Buy local** Try to eat and stay at family-owned places and use community-owned services.
- **Cold showers** Avoid hot showers if water is heated by a wood fire.
- **Never litter** Carry out all your trash when camping or hiking, and pick up trash when you can.
- **Respect local traditions** Dress appropriately when visiting local churches or traditional communities.
- **Be curious** Ask locals about ways to avoid mistakes some travelers make – let us know what you learn.

## INTERNET RESOURCES

[www.eco-indextourism.org](http://www.eco-indextourism.org) Many links on sustainable travel.

[www.ecotourism.org](http://www.ecotourism.org) Links to ecofriendly businesses.

[www.planeta.com](http://www.planeta.com) Includes a free 93-page e-book.

[www.tourismconcern.org.uk](http://www.tourismconcern.org.uk) UK-based organization dedicated to promoting ethical tourism.

[www.transitionsabroad.com](http://www.transitionsabroad.com) Focuses on responsible travel.

## VOLUNTEER

Volunteering is the new travel – some tips follow; see p723 for more.

- Preserve turtle-nesting sites – from poachers and reckless tourists – at Refugio de Vida Silvestre La Flor (p499) in Nicaragua or Costa Rica’s Parque Nacional Tortuguero (p555).
- Ask around at volunteer hubs including Quetzaltenango (p139) in Guatemala and Boquete (p663) in Panama.
- Teach English: options include Comarca de Kuna Yala (p690) in Panama and San Salvador (p277) in El Salvador.

# The Authors



## CAROLYN MCCARTHY

**Coordinating Author, Panama**

Author of 10 travel guides, Carolyn McCarthy has been writing about the Americas since 1998. Panama, memorable for its warm tropical downpours, fried snappers, rainforest and sharks, has become one of her favorites. Her other Lonely Planet titles include *Chile*, *Trekking in the Patagonian Andes*, *Panama* and *South America on a Shoestring*. A former Fulbright fellow, Carolyn's writing has appeared in *National Geographic*, the *Boston Globe* and other publications. She lives in southern Chile. Follow her Americas blog at [www.carolynswildblueyonder.blogspot.com](http://www.carolynswildblueyonder.blogspot.com).



## GREG BENCHWICK

**Mexico's Yucatán & Chiapas**

Greg first visited the Yucatán Peninsula on a family trip back in the early '80s. He's been coming back regularly ever since. When he's not writing about sustainable travel or Latin America, Greg loves to explore the wild areas of his native Colorado with his wife and their three-legged Turkish street dog. To see videos from Greg's adventures, check out his website, [www.soundtraveler.com](http://www.soundtraveler.com).



## JOSHUA SAMUEL BROWN

**Belize**

American-born and USC Annenberg/Getty Arts Journalism fellow Joshua Samuel Brown has lived in Taiwan, Hong Kong and China since 1994, and has traveled extensively around America, Canada and Belize. His features have appeared in an eclectic variety of publications around the globe, including the *South China Morning Post*, *Business Traveler Asia*, *Clamor Magazine* and *Cat Fancy*. To date, Joshua has coauthored four travel guides for Lonely Planet. His debut book, *Vignettes of Taiwan*, is available at bookstores in Asia, through Amazon or at [www.josambro.com](http://www.josambro.com). Google 'Snarky Tofu' to follow Joshua's strange journey around the world.

### LONELY PLANET AUTHORS

Why is our travel information the best in the world? It's simple: our authors are passionate, dedicated travelers. They don't take freebies in exchange for positive coverage so you can be sure the advice you're given is impartial. They travel widely to all the popular spots, and off the beaten track. They don't research using just the internet or phone. They discover new places not included in any other guidebook. They personally visit thousands of hotels, restaurants, palaces, trails, galleries, temples and more. They speak with dozens of locals every day to make sure you get the kind of insider knowledge only a local could tell you. They take pride in getting all the details right, and in telling it how it is. Think you can do it? Find out how at [lonelyplanet.com](http://lonelyplanet.com).



## ALEX EGERTON

### Nicaragua

A journalist by trade, Alex has been hanging around in Central America for almost a decade, teaching at universities, contributing to magazines and searching for the perfect fried cheese. He currently divides his time between suburban Managua and Bluefields, where he lives in a recording studio and writes about all things Caribbean. Alex is also actively involved in a project promoting sustainable tourism in remote indigenous communities in Nicaragua. While on the road for this guide, Alex twice bought medicine from persuasive pharmaceutical salesmen on intercity buses, but has yet to try either pill.



## MATTHEW D FIRESTONE

### Costa Rica

Matthew is a trained anthropologist and epidemiologist, though he postponed his academic career to spend his youth living out of a backpack. To date he has authored more than 20 guidebooks for Lonely Planet, and covered far-flung destinations from the Darién Gap to the Dead Sea. When he's not in graduate school, out in the field or on assignment, he likes to spend his time exploring the American West with his parents, or catching up with the in-laws in the foothills of Mt Fuji.



## KEVIN RAUB

### Honduras

Kevin Raub grew up in Atlanta and started his career as a music journalist in New York, working for *Men's Journal* and *Rolling Stone* magazines. The rock 'n' roll lifestyle took its toll, so he needed an extended vacation and took up travel writing. He accepted the Honduras gig a few weeks before all hell broke loose, but went anyway. Though he was stopped nine times at police checkpoints, he soldiered on, canvassing the country in his rented Mitsubishi pick-up truck, which he managed to only get stuck once, deep in a dead-end mountain road between Marcala and La Esperanza. This is his eighth Lonely Planet title.



## TOM SPURLING

### El Salvador

When Tom Spurling last visited Central America, he left his passport at a Nicaraguan hostel and got red-taped at the border. For this guide he explored every craggy, volcanic corner of El Salvador, making hit-and-write missions to guerrilla strongholds and Rasta bars armed with acidophilus and very full briefs. On behalf of Lonely Planet, Tom has now linguistically butchered Spanish, Turkish, Hindi and outback Queensland's rising inflection. His best travel experience was working on a project supported by the Planet Wheeler Foundation in rural South Africa. He lives in Melbourne with his wife and son who indulge his inability to pack light or travel safe.



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## LUCAS VIDGEN

### Guatemala

Lucas has been traveling and working in Latin America for 15 years. He currently lives in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, where he sits on the board of directors of NGO Entre Mundos and publishes the city's leading culture and nightlife magazine, *XelaWho*. Having contributed to various books for Lonely Planet, Lucas now mostly divides his time between Central and South America. He is a regular contributor to Lonely Planet titles *Nicaragua*, *Argentina*, *South America on a Shoestring* and *Central America on a Shoestring*. His Spanish is OK, but he misses potato cakes and his mum.

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## CONTRIBUTING AUTHOR

**Dr David Goldberg** wrote the Health chapter. He completed his training in internal medicine and infectious diseases at Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center in New York City, where he has also served as voluntary faculty. At present he is an infectious-diseases specialist in Scarsdale, New York, and the editor in chief of the website [MDtravelhealth.com](http://MDtravelhealth.com).

# 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, a few multicountry trips with one gateway 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.

See p726 for information on 'open-jaw' air tickets to Central America, and p732 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** (p102) 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** (p115) 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** (p128), before continuing on to **Chichicastenango** (p131) to see the famous Maya market. Pad your 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** (p37) and the Maya ruins amid the jungle at **Palenque** (p44). Visit the riverside ruins

**Mountains, jungle, beaches, ruins: this diverse route is classic Central America, summoning culture, adventure and serious relaxation. Feel free to linger in one place and save a slice or three for the next trip.**



of **Yaxchilán** (p48) en route to the mother of Maya sites, **Tikal** (p198), back in Guatemala. Bus east to Belize, stopping for a Frisbee golf round at a jungle base outside hilly **San Ignacio** (p245), before splashing into the Caribbean's wonderful reefs at laid-back **Caye Caulker** (p231).

#### HOW LONG?

Minimum: 5 to 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 to US\$40 per day, US\$10 more at beach towns and in Mexico and Belize

Cay-hop south, stopping at offbeat **Hopkins** (p253) or more mainstream **Placencia** (p255), before boating to Guatemala's **Livingston** (p184) to take a serious jungle boat trip along the **Río Dulce** (p188).

Cross into Honduras and head for the cobblestone town of **Copán Ruinas** (p369), offering river-tubing trips, horseback rides over mountains, and the namesake ruins. Bus to **Gracias** (p381), and thank the colonial town for its proximity to a quetzal-rich national park.

Southward in El Salvador, stop in kitschy mountain town **La Palma** (p323) for hikes over high-up log bridges. Bypass San Salvador for the Pacific 'surf villages' of **La Costa del Bálamo** (p293), where you can get cheap surf lessons. Catch a Guatemala City bus from San Salvador.

#### SIDE TRIPS

If you're big on ruins, detour from Palenque to colonial **Mérida** (p53), stopping at **Uxmal** (see boxed text, p56), then visit **Chichén Itzá** (p56) and **Tulum** (p68). Bus to Belize, then go west to Tikal.

If you've 'done Mexico,' though, skip it. From Chichicastenango head to **Nebaj** (p136) for day hikes and a few days in **Quetzaltenango** (p139) to explore volcanoes and traditional villages. Head north past Huehuetenango into the stunning wilds of the Ixcán region and make your way east, stopping in for a dip at the sublime **Laguna Lachuá** (see boxed text, p170) en route to the crossroads for either **Cobán** (p165) or Tikal.

Need more water? Before Copán, detour to the party-activities hub of **La Ceiba** (p395) and boat to the **Bay Islands** (p408) for some diving.

## SOUTHERN LOOP Costa Rica, Panama & Nicaragua

Nicaragua and Panama frame the more tourist-trodden Costa Rica. Starting in **San José** (p534), take the bus-and-boat trip to the English-speaking Caribbean coast and turtle country at **Tortuguero** (p555), then boat and bus back south to the party-surf town of **Puerto Viejo de Talamanca** (p564). Cross into Panama and boat out to the Caribbean archipelago of **Bocas del Toro** (p670) for island-hopping and surfing. Then head to Central America's cosmopolitan capital, **Panama City** (p638), with its Havana-like charm and a look at the **Panama Canal** (p653). Bus west, via David, to the cool coffee highlands around **Boquete** (p663) and look out over the Pacific and Caribbean from atop **Volcán Barú** (p667).

#### HOW LONG?

5 to 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 to US\$40 per day, more at beach towns

Bus back to Costa Rica, taking the ferry from Puntarenas for checking out the boho hangout of **Montezuma** (p592) on Península de Nicoya, near swimming holes, wilderness beaches and surfing in **Mal País** (p595). Get back to Puntarenas to reach Nicaragua's double-volcano **Isla de Ometepe** (p500), after hammock swings and rum at fun but gringofied **San Juan del Sur** (p496), then visit colonial **Granada** (p484), with volcanoes and eerie night hiking. Bus, via Managua, to Rama for a boat to Bluefields and a boat out to **Little Corn Island** (p515) for serious snorkeling and kick-back time. Retrace your steps to Managua for a direct bus back to San José.

#### SIDE TRIPS

For an alternative return to Costa Rica from Nicaragua, cross the border at Los Chiles, after a boat ride along the **Río San Juan** (p507). In Costa Rica, bus via Ciudad Quesada to **La Virgen** (p577), a rafting highlight.



Get the 'wow' of Central American wildlife in the more expensive (and popular) Costa Rica, before the 'whoa now' jolt of the authentic, less touristy countries next door. Both are touted as the 'new Costa Rica,' with volcanoes and rich coastlines, but you'll probably love them for other reasons.

In Panama, take a chill beach-and-surf detour to **Playa Venao** (p684) on the Península de Azuero. If you have a splurge fund, consider an unreal adventure near the **Darién Gap** (p694), or fly to the fascinating Kuna-inhabited islands known as **Comarca de Kuna Yala** (p690).

## ACTION ALL THE WAY!

Seize the great outdoors on this slender isthmus with volcanoes, mountains, rivers and waves. If you've never surfed or gone diving, no excuses! Central America is the place to learn.

Starting in Guatemala's highlands, get into the regional swing with a guided bike ride around **Antigua** (p109). Chicken-bus it to wee **Nebaj** (p136) and arrange a three-day hike through the Cuchumatanes mountains to **Todos Santos** (p153). From colonial Quetzaltenango, set aside two days to climb Central America's highest point, **Volcán Tajumulco** (p142).

Bus via Guatemala City to Honduras' **Copán Ruinas** (p369), a touristy hub with horseback rides and famous ruins. Campers should head to **Parque Nacional Montaña de Celaque** (p384), near Gracias, and take butterfly-lined paths to campsites in the cloud forest. Bus to **La Ceiba** (p395), Honduras' activities and party center, with canopy tours and rafting trips on the Río Cangrejal. Boat out to the **Bay Islands** (p408), for snorkeling or reef dives and certification courses.

Southwest in El Salvador, stop in artsy **Suchitoto** (p319) and go by horseback to former FMLN hideouts at Volcán Guazapa. Pass on the capital for **La Libertad** (p291), the nation's surf capital. Bus to Nicaragua, stopping in colonial **León** (p476) for a climb up and slide down a nearby volcano. Give a couple of days at least for **Isla de Ometepe** (p500), a volcano island in a sea-sized lake with hikes up to – and past – the clouds.

### HOW LONG?

5 to 7 weeks

### WHEN TO GO?

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

### BUDGET?

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



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

Costa Rica is flooded with options. DIY canoe rides through the **Tortuguero** (p555), accessed via Río San Juan, remains a Central America highlight. In the south, **Parque Nacional Chirripó** (p609) has a well-marked two-day trail to the country's highest mountain, with a bunkhouse way up.

In Panama, detour from David to **Boquete** (p663), near Volcán Barú and rivers to raft. Brush up on your surf skills at one of the region's best waves, at **Santa Catalina** (p681). Before you end your trip, get some Rollerblades to traverse the causeway along the mouth of the Panama Canal near **Panama City** (p643). 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 do 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 of stabs at what you can accomplish in just 14 days.

### 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 nights in **Panama City** (p638) – see the canal and colonial Casco Viejo. Bus 15 hours to **San José** (p534), 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** (p550) to climb a volcano. Get the morning bus for a 10-plus-hours trip to Nicaragua's colonial wonder **Granada** (p484) for a couple of nights wandering past the plaza's mango trees and to take a canopy tour down a volcano. Wake up *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** (p369) – but not forgetting the nearby Maya ruins. Get a shuttle bus (six hours) to **Antigua** (p102) for the last couple of days in the volcano-studded highlands, hopefully squeezing in a day trip to the **Chichicastenango market** (p132). 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 – sticks with traditional villages where long-rooted traditions live large. Hang out with the 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** (p260).

Ferry to Puerto Barrios, Guatemala, and bus to **Cobán** (p165) to stay in the cloud forest for a couple of days with a Q'eqchi' family.

Bus east into Honduras, where you can hang out on the beach and try local coconut bread at low-key Garífuna villages such as **La Ensenada** (p394), then bus from **Santa Rosa de Copán** (p379) to see the Lenca market at cliff-hugging **Belén Gualcho** (see boxed text, p384). It's a seven-hour bus ride to Tegucigalpa.

**With just two weeks up your sleeve, you can make a mad dash and try to see as much as you can, or just take it very, very easy soaking up a culture that doesn't ever hurry.**

# Getting Started

Preparing a trip is half the fun, even if your itinerary 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, see also the Central America Directory (p710).

## 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 around 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 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. Either side of this period – mid-November or mid-April – can be the best time to visit.

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.

## 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

For climate charts of select cities in Central America, see p714; see also Climate in the Directory of each country chapter.

### 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 breakfasts (at US\$4 a pop and up).
- Walk around – from bus stations, to museums across town – to save on using taxis.
- Team up with fellow travelers – solo travelers often pay the same as a couple does, 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), partyers. 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.

### WHAT TO TAKE

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

- An alarm clock for early buses (and many do leave early).
- Books for leisure time or waiting for transport. However, book exchanges in big cities and traveler hangouts have new and used books in English.
- Camping gear if you plan to camp; bring it all (except fuel for the stove) as equipment is overpriced and not always available.
- 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 snapshot or two of the family back home will be appreciated by your new Central American friends.
- Rain gear: a thin waterproof jacket and a rainproof sack for your pack is a godsend; you may be dry in the bus, but your pack on top can get soaked.
- Repellent: best found in larger towns and cities.
- A Latin American Spanish phrasebook (see p741).
- A universal sink plug and clothesline for washing laundry and hanging up wet clothes.
- A water filter/purifier for camping or just potable water.

buses!), but even in these countries you can still usually find dorm beds for as low as US\$10 to US\$15, and a bed in a guesthouse for US\$25 to US\$40.

### How Much Do You Need?

In general, it's possible to get by on a daily budget of US\$15 (in Guatemala) to US\$40 (in Mexico or Belize). This range is a bare minimum per day, involving staying in a hostel with 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 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 p719, as well as the Money section in each country's Directory.

### Foreigner Prices

Museums and national parks throughout Central America often charge higher admission fees for foreign tourists. It's sometimes about twice what the 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.

#### HOW MUCH?

Bottle of beer US\$0.70-3

Bus ride (3hr) US\$3.50-10

Dorm bed US\$6-15

Hotel double US\$8-35

Internet access per hr  
US\$1-2

Set lunch US\$3-5

## PRETRIP INSPIRATION

### Film

A bit of celluloid can whet the appetite for Central America. The region has been a playground for big-budget films, but let's face it, *Apocalypto* and *Jurassic Park* offer little insight into Latin American culture.

Watch out for more non-Hollywood films being made here. *Looking for Palladin* (2008), written and directed by Andrzej Krakowski and shot in Antigua, gives a good sense of the street. The award-winning *La casa de enfrente* (2003), directed by Tonatiúh Martínez, delves into such gritty subjects as corruption and prostitution; it's part of the new wave of Guatemalan filmmaking.

Director Paz Fabrega won international awards for 2010's *Agua fría de mar* (Cold Sea Water), the Costa Rican story of a young couple and a seven-year-old girl from opposite sides of the social spectrum. *Sin nombre* (Nameless) was a 2009 Sundance prize winner about gangs and illegal immigration that opens in Honduras.

The first Panamanian-made commercial film was 2009's *Chance*, a worthy tropical comedy about class shenanigans, told by two maids. Also from Panama, *Burwa dii Ebo* (The Wind and the Water), an official 2008 Sundance selection, follows an indigenous Kuna teenager who moves to Panama City. Though yet to be commercially distributed, it has also won awards in Toronto and Chile.

The 2008 Salvadoran war film *Sobreviviendo Guazapa* (Surviving Guazapa), directed by Roberto Davila, is a kind of Central American *Rambo*. *Walker* (1987) is Nicaraguan director Alex Cox's unconventional take on the adventures of Central America's most infamous megalomaniac, shot on location in Nicaragua.

Classics include Woody Allen's spoof *Bananas*, and *The Mosquito Coast* (starring Harrison Ford), set in Honduras and shot in Belize.

### Literature

Travelers along the Maya route have the perfect introduction to these fascinating ancient civilizations with Michael D Coe's *Breaking the Maya Code*.

More than just a travelogue, Salman Rushdie's *The Jaguar Smile: A Nicaraguan Journey* is a witty and opinionated account of his visit during the revolution.

*Costa Rica: A Traveler's Literary Companion* offers 26 short stories that capture the soul of the country. *The Last Flight of the Scarlet Macaw* is Bruce Barcott's account of one activist making a difference in Belize.

*The Soccer War* by Ryszard Kapuscinski is an entertaining and harsh account of the 100-hour war between Honduras and El Salvador. Paul Theroux's excellent *The Mosquito Coast* prompted the film about the American family in the heart of darkness. For a sense of the elephantine undertaking of the Panama Canal, read the 700-page *The Path Between the Seas* by David McCollough (also handy as a yoga block).

For more book suggestions, see p713, as well the Books sections in each country's Directory.

### Internet Resources

- Visit **Mundo Maya online** ([www.mayadiscovery.com](http://www.mayadiscovery.com)) for articles, Maya legends and information on the region.
- Surf **Ecotravels** ([www.planeta.com](http://www.planeta.com)), with arresting articles, reference material and links.
- Find **community-based tourism** ([www.redturs.org](http://www.redturs.org)) initiatives.
- Fabulous **El Salvador blog** ([www.luterano.blogspot.com](http://www.luterano.blogspot.com)) has great insights.
- Check out **Amnesty International** ([www.amnesty.org](http://www.amnesty.org)) reports on Central America.
- Compare famous Central American rums via expert reviews at **Ministry of Rum** ([www.ministryofrum.com](http://www.ministryofrum.com)).

See also p718 for a list of useful online sources.

**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 use *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.

**CONDUCT**

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

**Introductions**

A simple *buenos días* 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* used to refer to indigenous people is generally considered offensive; the word *indigena* 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 to dealings with the officials (ie immigration personnel 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 wear and dress accordingly.

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 *and* a sunburn. See p724 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 wealth to many would-be thieves, particularly in the capital cities. See p715 for more on basic travel safety.

