El Salvador

El Salvador is that little dynamo in Central America that past visitors just keep going on and on about. Glimpses of tropical paradise, lush tracts of pre-industrial national park, 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 with world-class waves, a culture-clad capital famed for its nightlife, hard-core war tourism and small-town charm by the plaza-load.

Salvadorans themselves are genuinely hospitable. Once departing en masse, many are now content to return home, 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.

Best Places to Eat
- Beto’s (p297)
- R&R (p318)
- Balompie Cafe (p313)
- Danilo’s (p304)

Best Places to Stay
- La Tortuga Verde (p333)
- Hotel Mopelia (p306)
- Los Almendros de San Lorenzo (p338)
- Casa ILB (p293)

When to Go

San Salvador

Dec & Jan End of the rain, bright green landscapes, perfect weather. Friendly, relaxed scene.

May–Aug Surf is up (so high you need to know what you’re doing).

Jul–Nov Turtle nesting season! Chaperone baby sea turtles to their new homes among the waves.
Connections
From Guatemala, enter through Anguiatú, San Cristóbal or La Hachadura. From Honduras, El Poy or El Amatillo are your two official options.

Many operators are now offering boat transfers from La Union, El Salvador to Potosí, Nicaragua. The best of these are La Tortuga Verde in El Cuco and Suchitoto Outfitters in Suchitoto. This is both a time- and cost-effective way to continue your travels through Central America. For more detailed information, see Survival Guide on p352.

FIRST TIME IN EL SALVADOR
El Salvador is small so you don’t need a lot of time to see a lot of the country; this itinerary can be done in a week. Start in the capital, San Salvador, to get your head around recent history in the excellent museums and galleries. If it’s a weekend, party in Zona Rosa and Colonia Escalon.

Shake off the smog for a night or two in Suchitoto then veer west to Lago Coatepeque for a dip in the volcano lake. Next scoot along the Ruta de las Flores, ducking in and out of coffee plantations and waterfalls. Stay in either Juayúa or Ataco.

Reach an endpoint in Tacuba before braving Parque Nacional El Imposible all the way to the Pacific Coast at Barra de Santiago. Cruise along the Costa del Balance, stopping for a night or two in Playa El Tunco, then punch east along the highway to El Cuco, where you can arrange your boat to Nicaragua.

Essential Food & Drink
What to eat A typical breakfast includes eggs, beans or casamiento (rice and beans mixed together), fried plantains, cheese, tortillas and coffee or juice. Almuerzo (lunch) is the largest meal of the day and often the most expensive. El Salvador street food is all about pupusas: round cornmeal dough stuffed with a combination of cheese, refried beans, chicharrón (pork rinds), or revuelta (all three), and grilled. Also popular in the evening are panes – French breads sliced open and stuffed with chicken, salsa, salad and pickled vegetables.

Where to eat Panaderías usually offer a selection of morning cakes and coffee. Most pupuserías open at around 4pm and some work the same sidewalk space for years.

What to drink Licuados (fruit drinks made with water or milk); horchata (rice milk and cinnamon); and refresco de ensalada – a mixed fruit juice served with a spoon for the fruit salad floating on top, sangria style. Note that refresco, which means soft drink in many countries, here means lemonade.