

# Welcome to Central America

*With turquoise seas and lush forests, magnificent Maya ruins, bustling markets and flourishing farms, Central America is packed with opportunities to chill out – or thrill out.*

## Outdoor Adventure

Eight countries with 300-plus volcanoes and two long tropical coasts make for a pretty big playground. Paddle deep into indigenous territories in a dugout canoe, or explore the remains of Spanish forts on the coast. Zip through rainforest canopies, swim alongside sea turtles or trek to sublime cloud-forest vistas. Everywhere you go, you'll be accompanied by a wild cast of characters: a resplendent quetzal on the highland trail; an unruly troupe of howler monkeys screeching through the canopy; or a breaching whale that turns your ferry ride into an adrenaline-rush event. Your adventures are limited only by your will.

## Maya Ruins

The Maya territory sprawled from Mexico to Honduras, with ruins in five present-day Central American countries. Visit them to step into a mysterious, spine-tingling universe. Explore the lost temples of Tikal, soaring above the Guatemalan jungle canopy. Investigate otherworldly Palenque and Tulum, perched above the crashing surf. See jaguars carved to life at Copán, and find out why Chichén Itzá is one of the new seven wonders of the world. Discover a culture that harks back 4000 years – the greatest pre-Columbian civilization – and still persists today.

## Diverse Cultures

Central America may be the size of Texas, but its rich mix of people and cultures has created a diverse and dynamic society. With more than 20 Maya languages spoken, Guatemala is the region's indigenous heartland. The Spanish left their mark throughout the region, with majestic colonial plazas, fervent beauty contests and silent hours of siesta. African culture permeates the Caribbean coast, from Congo rebel traditions to Garifuna drumbeats. And the last century brought the rest of the world – Asians, Europeans, North Americans – along with a coat of modernity that dressed up Panama City into a contemporary capital.

## Sun & Sea

With chilled-out Caribbean vibes on one side and monster Pacific swells on the other, Central America sits poised to deliver the best of all beach worlds. From deserted *playas* to full-moon parties, this tiny region can deliver just about any sun-soaked experience that your inner beach bum desires. Plus, there's that magnificent, mysterious world that begins at the water's edge. Seize it by scuba diving with whale sharks in Honduras, snorkeling the world's second-largest coral reef in Belize, getting stoked on Costa Rica's world-class surf breaks, or setting sail among Panama's virgin isles. Hello, paradise.



## Why I Love Central America

By Mara Vorhees, Writer

On a clear day at the summit of Panama's Volcán Barú, you can see both the Caribbean Sea and the Pacific Ocean in one sweeping, 360-degree vista, from sea to shining sea. (There's a fun fact to impress your trivia team.) I love how this little isthmus – just 50km wide at its narrowest point – contains a whole continent's worth of adventure, history and habitats. Whether you take a week or take a year, you'll only scratch the surface of this rich, varied region.

**For more about our writers, see page 768**