

# Understand Central America

## **CENTRAL AMERICA TODAY ..... 708**

Transportation and tourism are economic highlights, while energy security (or lack thereof) is a concern. Poverty and violence continue to cast a long, dark shadow over the region.

## **HISTORY ..... 710**

Central America is a little region with a big history, from the mysterious Maya to the Spanish conquistadors to the 20th-century struggles for peace and prosperity.

## **PEOPLE & CULTURE ..... 717**

In a region dominated by mestizo peoples, minority groups of European, African and indigenous descent have played a prominent role in the history and culture.

# Central America Today

The outlook for Central America today depends greatly on where one is standing. From the southern part of the region, the future looks bright, with mostly stable politics and expanding economic opportunities in tourism and transportation. Things look bleaker from the northern countries, where many citizens are struggling to break out of an interminable cycle of violence and poverty, with the only escape often being emigration.

## Best on Film

**Ixcánul** (dir Jayro Bustamante; 2015) Multi-award-winning film about a young Kaqchikel girl's coming of age in Guatemala.

**Mosquito Coast** (dir Peter Weir; 1986) Harrison Ford and River Phoenix star as members of an American family in search of a simpler life in Central America. Set in Honduras; filmed in Belize.

**Curse of the Xtabai** (dir Matthew Klinck; 2012) Belizeans are quite proud of this feature-length horror film, the first to be 100% filmed and produced in Belize using local scenery, cast and crew.

**Hands of Stone** (dir Jonathan Jakubowicz; 2016) The anticipated biopic of Panamanian boxing legend Roberto Durán, starring Robert De Niro.

## Best in Print

**A Mayan Life** (Gaspar Pedro González; 1995) The first published novel by a Maya author is an excellent study of rural Guatemalan life.

**The Country Under My Skin** (Gioconda Belli; 2003) An enthralling autobiography detailing the Nicaraguan poet's involvement in the Nicaraguan revolution.

**Empire of Blue Water** (Stephen Talty; 2008) An intriguing pirate history and a *New York Times* bestseller.

## Canals: Bigger & Deeper

The Panama Canal is surely one of the region's biggest success stories, hauling in US\$2 billion annually and fueling the fastest-growing economy in Latin America. And now it's about to get even bigger. One of the world's largest transportation projects, the US\$17-billion expansion will double the capacity and triple the traffic in the canal by adding a third lane and digging deeper to accommodate bigger vessels. A financial boon for Panama, the expanded canal is expected to be completed in 2016, just on the heels of its 100th anniversary.

Meanwhile, up the road, Nicaragua is supposedly starting its own big dig – a US\$50-billion waterway connecting the Atlantic and the Pacific. At 277km long, the Nicaragua Canal would be nearly four times longer than its Panamanian predecessor. The Chinese-funded project has come under fire for its unrealistic price tag and timeline, as well as unaddressed environmental and logistical concerns. Construction is scheduled to begin in late 2016, but as this date keeps getting shifted back, some wonder if President Ortega and his Chinese partners really intend to follow through on this project.

## Politics of Petroleum

Initiated by former Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez in 2005, PetroCaribe is an alliance that grants its 17 member countries extremely favorable terms in their purchase of oil from Venezuela. The PetroCaribe initiative has undoubtedly benefited its members, which include Belize, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua.

But PetroCaribe has come under scrutiny in Venezuela, which faces its own economic crisis, especially with plunging oil prices. Meanwhile, Chávez's party (and that of his successor, President Nicolas Maduro) lost its majority in the Venezuelan National Assembly in 2015. Although Maduro has reiterated his commitment to the agreement, the opposition party is calling for its review and reform.