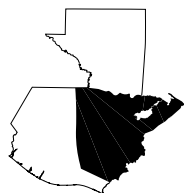


Central & Eastern Guatemala



Stretching from the steamy lowland forests of El Petén to the dry tropics of the Río Motagua valley, and from the edge of the western highlands to the Caribbean, this is the country's most diverse region.

The Carretera al Atlántico (Hwy 9) shoots eastward to the sea from Guatemala City. Along the way are numerous attractions – side trips to the pilgrim town of Esquipulas, and beyond to the wonderfully preserved ruins of Copán in Honduras. Further along the highway is Quiriguá, boasting impressive stelae more than 10m tall.

Another short detour brings you to Río Dulce, a favored resting spot for Caribbean sailors and gateway to the wilds of the Bocas del Polochic. While you're here, don't miss the gorgeous boat ride down the Río Dulce to the Garífuna enclave of Livingston.

The north of the region is lush and mountainous coffee-growing country. As you climb, you enter cloud forest where rain or at least mist will become a guaranteed daily part of your travels.

The limestone crags around Cobán attract covers the world over, but those at Lanquín, Rey Marcos and elsewhere are easily accessible for amateurs.

The two must-sees in the Cobán area are the beautiful pools and cascades of Semuc Champey and the Biotopo del Quetzal, a nature reserve where you stand a reasonable chance of seeing the elusive national bird, the quetzal.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Splashing around the turquoise waters of **Semuc Champey** (p222) and getting deep in the caves at **Grutas de Lanquín** (p221)
- Admiring the impressive carvings at **Copán** (p239) and **Quiriguá** (p236) and relaxing in the Antigua-rivaling beauty of **Copán Ruinas** (p245)
- Going bush in the jungle hideaway of **Las Conchas** (p226), where waterfalls, jungle treks and village tours await
- Getting down with the Garífuna in the unique Caribbean town of **Livingston** (p261)
- Taking in the natural beauty of such little-visited protected areas as **Parque Nacional Laguna Lachuá** (p224) and the **Bocas del Polochic** (p256)



ALTA & BAJA VERAPAZ

Hwy 14 (also marked Hwy 17) leaves the Carretera al Atlántico at El Rancho, 84km from Guatemala City. It heads west through a dry, desertlike lowland area, then turns north and starts climbing up into the forested hills. After 47km, at the junction called La Cumbre Santa Elena, Hwy 17 to Salamá divides from Hwy 14 for Cobán. Descending the other side of the ridge, Hwy 17 winds down into the broad valley of the Río Salamá, and enters Salamá town, 17km from the highway.

Before the Spanish conquest, the mountainous departments of Baja Verapaz and Alta Verapaz were populated by the Rabinal Maya, noted for their warlike habits and merciless victories. They battled the powerful K'iche' Maya for a century but were never conquered.

When the conquistadors arrived, they too had trouble defeating the Rabinal Maya. It was Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas who convinced the Spanish authorities to try peace where war had failed. Armed with an edict that forbade Spanish soldiers from entering the region for five years, the friar and his brethren pursued their religious mission, and succeeded in pacifying and converting the Rabinal Maya. Their homeland thus was renamed Verapaz (True Peace) and is now divided into Baja Verapaz, with its capital at Salamá, and Alta Verapaz, which is centered on Cobán. The Rabinal Maya have remained among the most dedicated and true to ancient Maya customs, and there are many intriguing villages to visit in this part of Guatemala, including Rabinal itself (p210).

Excellent information on both Alta and Baja Verapaz can be found online at www.infocoban.com.

SALAMÁ

pop 30,100 / elev 940m

A wonderful introduction to Baja Verapaz's not-too-hot, not-too-cold climate, Salamá is a smallish town with a couple of attractions.

Information

Banrural (☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) On the south side of the plaza (opposite the church), changes cash and traveler's checks and has a Visa and MasterCard ATM.

Police station One block west of the plaza.

Telgua (internet access per hr Q6) East of the plaza.

Sights

Salamá has some attractive reminders of colonial rule. The main plaza, for instance, boasts an ornate **church** with gold-encrusted altars and a carved pulpit, which is located just to the left before the altar. Be sure to check out Jesus lying in a glass coffin with cotton bunting in his stigmata and droplets of blood seeping from his hairline. His thick mascara and the silver lamé pillow where he rests his head complete the scene. The Salamá **market** is impressive for its colorful, local bustle, particularly on Sunday.

Tours

EcoVerapaz (☎ 5722-9095; ecoverapaz@hotmail.com; 8a Av 7-12, Zona 1; 1-day tour per person Q350) is in the shop Imprenta Mi Terruño – a block west of the plaza on the road to La Cumbre. Its local, trained naturalists offer interesting tours throughout Baja Verapaz including caving, bird-watching, hiking, horseback riding and orchid trips. EcoVerapaz also goes to Rabinal (p210) to check out its museum and crafts and arrange trips to see the famous rodeos of Baja Verapaz. Guides speak some English. Group discounts are offered.

Sleeping

Turicentro Las Orquideas (☎ 7940-1622; Carretera a Salamá Km 147; campsite Q30) Travelers with tents may want to check out this place, a few kilometers east of Salamá on Hwy 17. It has a grassy area for camping, plus a cafe, pool and open spaces hung with hammocks. You can use the pool (Q20 per person per day) even if you're not camping here.

Hotel San Ignacio (☎ 7940-0186; 4a Calle A 7-09; s/d Q75/130; (P)) Not the loveliest place you're ever likely to stay, but it's a reasonable deal for the price, and super-close to the park. Look for the big *palapa* (open-sided palm-leaf shelter) sitting area up on the rooftop.

Hotel Rosa de Sharon (☎ 5774-8650; 5a Calle 6-39; s/d Q80/130; (P)) The neat, bright rooms here loom over the busy market area, but they're set back from the road, so remain peaceful. They're big and clean, with wacky decorations such as wrought-iron hat stands made to look like trees.

Posada de Don Maco (☎ 7940-0083; 3a Calle 8-26; s/d Q110/140; (P)) This clean, family-run place has simple but spacious rooms with fan and good bathrooms. The courtyard boasts a collection of caged squirrels.