

El Petén



Vast, sparsely populated and jungle-covered, Guatemala's largest department is ripe for further exploration.

Two things really stand out about El Petén – the well-preserved (and often unrestored) archaeological sites and the abundance of wildlife that inhabits the jungle surrounding them.

There are so many Maya ruins here that you can take your pick depending on ease of access. The towering temples of Tikal can be reached by tour from just about anywhere in the country, minimizing your time outside of air-conditioned comfort. Other, more remote sites like El Mirador and Piedras Negras require days of planning, and further days of jungle trekking.

Wherever you go, you'll be accompanied by a jungle symphony – the forests are alive with parrots, monkeys and larger, more elusive animals.

The 21,000-sq-km Reserva de Biosfera Maya (Maya Biosphere Reserve) occupies approximately the whole northern third of El Petén. This Guatemalan reserve adjoins the vast Calakmul Biosphere Reserve in Mexico and the Río Bravo Conservation Area in Belize, forming a multinational wildlife haven that spans more than 30,000 sq km. The great variety of animal, bird and plant life is as exciting as the mysteries of the ancient Maya cities – and sites in El Petén combine both.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Taking in the majesty of the jungle-shrouded ruins at **Tikal** (p287)
- Exploring little-excavated ruins like **El Mirador** (p308) and **Piedras Negras** (p306)
- Spotting rare birds, monkeys and other rainforest wildlife at **Tikal** (see boxed text, p294) and other sites
- Taking a break at the picturesque island town of **Flores** (p272) or marvelously mellow **El Remate** (p284)
- Boating, horseback riding and trekking your way to ancient Maya ruins around **Sayaxché** (p301)



