

On the Road



LUCAS VIDGEN *Coordinating Author*

The area around Río Dulce (p252) and Livingston (p261) is fast becoming one of my favorites. I live in the mountains, so the lush countryside, mild climate and fresh sea breezes make for a welcome change. I especially love the boat ride down the river – the area teems with birdlife, and the section where the river narrows and flows through a steep-walled, jungle-covered canyon is one of Guatemala's truly unforgettable spots. There are some great places to stay along the river, and a host of colorful characters to meet. I'd definitely come here more often, if it weren't so far from home...



DANIEL C SCHECHTER Here I'm admiring the interior of the church of San Antonio Palopó (p129). Outside, a funeral procession had just taken place and the villagers – the women in royal blue *huipiles* (tunics), the men sporting woolen half-length skirts – were still praying over the deceased. I'm not a religious person but had no difficulty feeling the spirit that prevails in this remote, strongly traditional village on Lago de Atitlán's eastern shore.

Destination Guatemala

There are things you'll experience in Guatemala that will stay with you forever: the smell of a freshly grilled tortilla; the assault-on-all-senses of the everyday street market; the bliss of swimming in a waterfall after a sweaty jungle trek; the people you bump into on the road who become lifelong friends.

Most stirring of all, perhaps, is experiencing Guatemala's thriving Maya heritage. This amazing culture has left some of the most impressive ruins in the region, many of which are still used for sacred rituals. The awe-inspiring temples of Tikal are easily visited from the charming island town of Flores, while deeper in the jungles of El Petén, getting to remote sites such as El Mirador is as much about the journey as the destination. Lesser-known sites like Quiriguá and Takalik Abaj are easily reached and some say more satisfying – the atmosphere amplified, as you'll most likely be the only visitor there.

The Maya legacy looms large in modern-day Guatemala, a complex panorama of urban bustle and back-country splendor. Shunned by many, the workaday capital is Guatemala at its liveliest, and home to some of the best museums, restaurants and cultural centers in the country. If that gets a little overwhelming, the colonial grandeur of Antigua is just down the road, where around every corner you'll find another picture-postcard scene. If you're looking for something in between, head to the mountains – many travelers find Guatemala's second city, Quetzaltenango, to be the perfect compromise between authentic grit and travelers' amenities.

And then there's the glory of Guatemala's countryside – volcanoes and lakes separated by wild forest, jungle, corn fields and small farms, and the charm of simple village life. A ride from the mountains to the coast takes you through 32 microclimates. In the west, a volcano looms on nearly every horizon, almost begging to be climbed. Up north, the steamy jungles of El Petén surround expansive Maya ruins, and teem with exotic wildlife. The center of the country is covered with lush hillsides, carpeted with cloud forest that the elusive quetzal bird calls home, and pocked by cave systems you can explore in a couple of hours on innertube or on all-out two-day expeditions. To the east, the combined waterways of Río Dulce and the Lago de Izabal provide a safe haven, both for yachts in hurricane season and for wildlife in extensive wetlands reserves. And any discussion of the country's landscape would be incomplete without a mention of its crowning glory, the volcanoringed Lago de Atitlán, which has been mesmerizing travelers for centuries.

Guatemalans are a friendly, welcoming bunch for the most part, and you won't feel like an outsider for long. There are a couple of ways to really get beneath the surface, though. The hundreds of cheap, reputable language schools around the country can not only give you the skills to get around and make some new friends on that next bus ride – they can also provide a much richer understanding of Guatemalan culture, history and customs. And once you've got your Spanish mojo working, you can take it a step further by volunteering in any of the countless worthwhile projects dotted around the country, gaining insight into the day-to-day realities of the place and maybe making a difference as well.

An adventure awaits, and while travel in Guatemala was once characterized by hardship and uncertainty, these days your biggest challenge is likely to be finding time to fit everything in.

FAST FACTS

Population: 15 million

Area: 108,894 sq km

Number of seats in Guatemalan Congress: 158

President: Álvaro Colom (Unidad Nacional de la Esperanza)

GDP (per head): US\$5200 (2009)

Inflation: 2.3% (2007)

Unemployment: 3.2% (2005)

Main exports: coffee, sugar, petroleum, clothing, bananas, fruits and vegetables, cardamom

Ratio of cell phones to landlines: 10:1

Number of times Guatemala has qualified for the football World Cup: 0

Getting Started

Traveling in Guatemala requires little detailed planning. Local transportation is plentiful – for many trips all you need do is show up and hop on the next bus. Accommodations are equally easy: unless you have your heart set on one hotel, booking ahead isn't usually necessary. The major exception is *Semana Santa* (Easter) and around Christmas/New Year, when it seems the whole country takes a holiday – during these times you'll need to book rooms, and often transportation, in advance.

Guatemala is a country for any budget. It's popular with backpackers because you can survive on a few dollars a day, but also has many midrange lodgings and restaurants offering comfort and quality at good prices.

See the Directory (p311) for more details on climate, festivals and events.

WHEN TO GO

There's no bad time to visit Guatemala, although the rain can definitely alter your traveling patterns. Guatemala's weather can generally be broken down into two basic seasons. *Invierno* (winter, or the rainy season) runs from mid-May to mid-October, and into November and December in the north and east, and can make unpaved roads more difficult to traverse. In the lowland jungles of El Petén, the mud at this time will slow you down, guaranteed. Humidity – never low on the coasts or in El Petén – increases during the rainy season too. It doesn't rain all day at this time, but you can expect daily showers (downpours in the north) at the very least, usually in the afternoon. *Verano* (summer, or the dry season) runs from about November to April, and this sees more comfortable temperatures in El Petén and along the coasts, along with some chilly nights in the highlands (where temperatures regularly drop below zero around Christmastime). In the eastern parts of the country, rain is possible at any time.

The height of the foreign tourist season is from Christmas to Easter, and coincides with when Guatemalans tend to take their holidays. Another busy time is June to August, when throngs of North American college students descend on Guatemala to study Spanish and travel.

See p318 for a list of the major festivals and events around the country.

COSTS & MONEY

Prices in Guatemala are among the best in Central America. Beds in *hospedajes* (guesthouses) normally cost Q60 to Q80 per person. Markets sell fruit and snacks for pennies, cheap eateries called *comedores* offer one- or two-course meals for Q20 to Q30, and bus trips cost around Q10 per hour. It's completely realistic to spend Q200 a day in Guatemala without too much hardship. If you want more comfort – nice rooms with private hot-water bathrooms and well-prepared food in pleasant surroundings, you'll still only pay around Q300 per person for a room and two – or even three – meals. Add in transportation, admission fees, some shopping and a few beers and you're looking at a total of around Q450 a day.

PRICES IN THIS GUIDE

We give admission prices for sights (museums, parks etc) listed in this guide where they exist – if there is no entry price given, you can assume entry is free. Hotel prices are listed with private bathroom – if the bathroom is shared, it will be specifically noted, except in the case of dorm rooms, where this is, of course, the norm.

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- Checking the visa situation (p322).
- Checking travel advisories (p316).
- Warm clothes for chilly highland nights – at least a sweater and a pair of warm pants.
- Photocopies of important documents (passport, plane tickets etc). For extra security, scan these and email them to yourself.
- Broken-in walking shoes or hiking boots.
- Ziplock bags – great for waterproofing your gadgets.
- Earplugs if you're a light sleeper and planning on sleeping in dorms.
- A flashlight (torch) for exploring caves, ruins and your room when the electricity fails (as has been known to happen).
- A mosquito net, if you're planning on hitting the jungle or sleeping in cheap rooms without screens.
- A basic understanding of Spanish, or a plan to learn some.
- Insect repellent containing DEET, for wet-season travels. You may also want to take medication against malaria, too.
- A small towel, for rooms without one.
- Telling your mother not to worry.

There are few bargains for solo travelers, as there often isn't much price difference between a single and double room. If it's practical, hook up with some other folks to defray room costs. Many places have rooms for three or four people, where the per-person price drops dramatically. In restaurants you can save money by opting for set two- or three-course meals (the *menú del día*). On the road, public buses are far cheaper than the more comfortable tourist shuttle buses.

While day-to-day items are affordable, imported products (particularly electronics) are expensive in Guatemala – if there's something even slightly exotic that you can't live without you're better off buying it at home.

TRAVELING RESPONSIBLY

Responsible travel in Guatemala often comes down to using your common sense. By spending money in small, local businesses, staying for extended periods, volunteering and interacting with 'everyday' people, you have the chance to have a positive effect here.

Littering, disrespecting local customs and supporting unsustainable or harmful industries (drugs, souvenirs and menu items made from endangered species are the main culprits here) are obvious no-nos.

In lowland areas try to use air-con sparingly – it's expensive and places a huge strain on local energy reserves. Instead, move more slowly than usual, keep out of the midday heat or (as a last resort) hang out in the lobby of a fancy hotel for some respite.

Small actions have big consequences here. Please be aware that industry professionals and community leaders are watching your habits and preferences closely. If you can, make the effort to visit a national park or reserve (see p58), try some community-based tourism (where proceeds go direct to the community, not to middlemen or tour operators – see our GreenDex, p358, for some ideas), or do some volunteer work (see p323). Be aware that tourist operators are well aware that Guatemala attracts altruistic types who

HOW MUCH?

Three-hour, 2nd-class bus ride Q30

A week of Spanish classes with homestay Q980-1600

Admission to Tikal Q150

Taxi from Guatemala City airport to city center Q80

Comfortable lakeside double with bathroom in Lago de Atitlán Q200-400

TOP 10

A stylized map of Guatemala, showing its borders with Honduras to the east. The capital, Guatemala City, is marked with a black dot and labeled. The word 'GUATEMALA' is written in large, bold, black letters across the top of the map.

Honduras

Guatemala City •

BEST MAYA READS

The Maya, past and present, are the theme of whole libraries of writing. Here are our 10 favorite books on them:

- 1 *The Maya*, Michael D Coe
- 2 *The Blood of Kings: Dynasty & Ritual in Maya Art*, Linda Schele and Mary Ellen Miller
- 3 *Scandals in the House of Birds: Shamans and Priests on Lake Atitlán*, Nathaniel Tarn
- 4 *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*, Rigoberta Menchú
- 5 *Maya of Guatemala – Life and Dress*, Carmen L Pettersen
- 6 *Chronicle of the Maya Kings and Queens*, Simon Martin and Nikolai Grube
- 7 *Unfinished Conquest: The Guatemalan Tragedy*, Victor Perera
- 8 *The Maya Textile Tradition*, Margot Blum Schevill (ed)
- 9 *Breaking the Maya Code*, Michael D Coe
- 10 *The Ancient Maya*, Robert J Sharer

CELESTIAL EVENTS

The stars, moon and sun were important to the Maya, so while you're here, you might find yourself looking to the heavens for inspiration. Here are some good places to start:

- 1 Sunrise from Tajumulco volcano (p161)
- 2 Sunset with a daiquiri in hand from a hammock in Monterrico (p201)
- 3 Full moon parties in San Pedro La Laguna (p133)
- 4 Stargazing from El Mirador, deep in the Petén jungle (p305)
- 5 Watching the sun set over Lago de Petén Itzá in Flores (p272)
- 6 Hiking the Santa María volcano (p161) by the light of the full moon
- 7 Aligning your chakras by starlight in a pyramid in San Marcos La Laguna (p139)
- 8 Bathing by the light of the moon in Quetzaltenango (p157)
- 9 Catching the sunrise from Temple IV in Tikal (p287)
- 10 Listening to jazz in the Sunset Café (p126) in Panajachel as the sun disappears behind the volcanoes

FESTIVALS

If there's one thing that Guatemalans know how to do, it's throw a party. Here are 10 of the best:

- 1 Cristo de Esquipulas (Jan 15) Pilgrims flock to the small town of Esquipulas (p232)
- 2 Quetzaltenango Music Festival (late Mar; see p163) Live music fans shouldn't miss this one
- 3 Desfile de Bufos (The Parade of Fools; Friday before Good Friday) Guatemala City university students take to the streets
- 4 Semana Santa (Easter; dates vary) Easter is celebrated all over the country; check out Antigua (p100) and Guatemala City
- 5 Cubulco (Jul 25) Keeping the Palo Volador (flying pole, see p211) tradition alive
- 6 San José Petén (Oct 31) This town (p283) hosts a unique festival, which sees human skulls paraded around town
- 7 Día de Todos los Santos (Nov 1) Celebrated with panache in Santiago Sacatepéquez and Sumpango (p112)
- 8 Todos Santos Cuchumatán (Nov 1) This tiny highlands town (p180) has drunken horse races through the main street
- 9 Garífuna Day (Nov 26) Livingston (p261) hosts the biggest Garífuna party
- 10 Quema del Diablo (Dec 7) People haul trash out into the street and make huge bonfires

are interested in supporting socially minded businesses. It's up to you, but if a business claims to support the community, it's always worth investigating a little before taking them at face value.

TRAVEL LITERATURE

Ronald Wright's *Time among the Maya* is a story of travels through the whole Maya region – Guatemala, Mexico, Belize and Honduras – delving into the glorious past and exploited present of the Maya and their obsession with time. Wright visits many of the places you'll visit, and his book is a fascinating read, despite being written during the troubled 1980s as the civil war raged in the background.

Peter Canby's *The Heart of the Sky* also takes you on a journey through the 'mundo Maya,' introducing you to a much wider cross-section of Guatemalan society.

Guatemalan Journey, by Stephen Connely Benz, casts an honest and funny modern traveler's eye on the country, as does Anthony Daniels' *Sweet Waist of America*, also published as *South of the Border: Guatemalan Days*, where the medic author pinpoints some of the country's contradictions.

Probably the most quoted travelogue on Guatemala is Aldous Huxley's *Beyond the Mexique Bay*. Written in the 1930s, many of Huxley's descriptions hold true today, particularly of Maya sites and natural wonders, such as Lago de Atitlán.

In *Sacred Monkey River*, Christopher Shaw explores by canoe the jungle-clad basin of the Río Usumacinta, a cradle of ancient Maya civilization along the Mexico–Guatemala border.

The 19th-century classic *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan*, by John L Stephens (illustrated by Frederick Catherwood), was the first serious look at many Maya archaeological sites. It's a laborious but interesting read.

The Full Montezuma, by Peter Moore, doesn't even approach literature, but it is a vaguely readable account of a young Australian backpacker's travels through the region.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Guatemala (www.visitguatemala.com) Moderately interesting official site of Inguat, the national tourism institute.

Guatemala Times (www.guatemala-times.com) The best English-language news source focusing on Guatemala.

Lanic Guatemala (<http://lanic.utexas.edu/la/ca/guatemala>) The University of Texas' magnificent collection of Guatemala links.

Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com) Succinct summaries on Guatemala travel, along with the popular Thorn Tree forum and links to the most useful travel resources elsewhere on the web.

Mostly Maya (www.mostlymaya.com) Extensive, practical information on visiting remote Maya sites, plus plenty more.

Xela Pages (www.xelapages.com) Good information on the highlands and coast and an excellent forum where you can get answers to even the most obscure questions.

Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

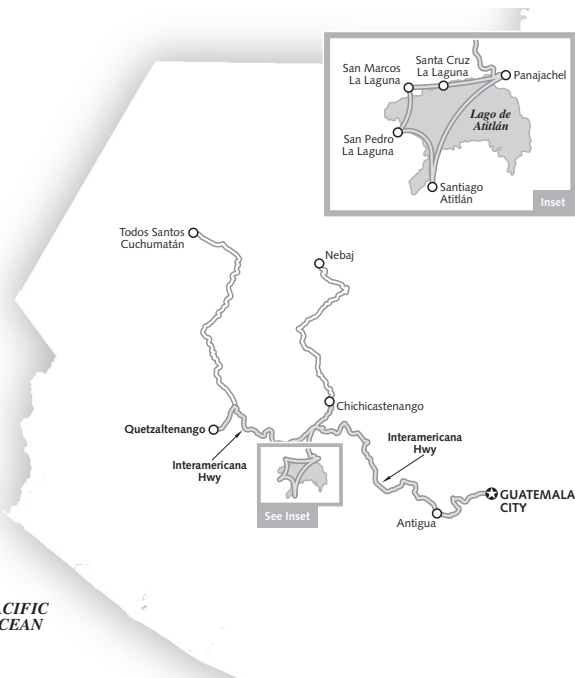
HIGHLAND FLING 10 Days / Guatemala City to Todos Santos Cuchumatán

Guatemala's most spectacular scenery and strongest Maya traditions await you along this well-traveled route.

From **Guatemala City** (p63) head to gorgeous **Antigua** (p86) to enjoy the country's finest colonial architecture, great restaurants and the lively traveler and language-student scene. Several volcanoes wait to be climbed here. From Antigua move on to **Panajachel** (p118), on volcano-ringed **Lago de Atitlán** (p116). Hop in a boat to check out some traditional Maya villages such as **Santiago Atitlán** (p130), **San Pedro La Laguna** (p133), **San Marcos La Laguna** (p139) or **Santa Cruz La Laguna** (p141). Head north to **Chichicastenango** (p143) for its huge Thursday and Sunday market. If you have extra time, detour to **Nebaj** (p153), where you'll find great walking and a strong Maya way of life amid stunning scenery.

From Chichicastenango follow the Interamericana Hwy west along the mountain ridges to **Quetzaltenango** (p157), Guatemala's clean, orderly, second city, with a host of intriguing villages, markets and natural wonders only short bus rides away. From Quetzaltenango you can head south, or on to Mexico – perhaps via **Todos Santos Cuchumatán** (p180), a fascinating Maya mountain town with great walking possibilities.

This 320km jaunt could take a few months if you stop off to learn some Spanish in Antigua, Panajachel, San Pedro La Laguna or Quetzaltenango, and you could more than double the distance with detours to Nebaj and Todos Santos Cuchumatán.



THE BIG LOOP

Three Weeks / Copán to Cobán

This trip takes you to the best of Guatemala's Maya ruins, into its dense jungles and to some of its spectacular natural marvels.

Start out heading northeast from Guatemala City and detour south into Honduras to see the great Maya site of **Copán** (p239). Return to Guatemala and continue northeastward to another fine Maya site, **Quiriguá** (p236) and on to the curious Garífuna enclave of **Livingston** (p261) on the sweaty Caribbean coast. Take a boat up the jungle-lined Río Dulce to **Río Dulce town** (p252), then turn north up Hwy 13 to stay and chill out at **Finca Ixobel** (p271), just outside **Poptún** (p270) before continuing to **Flores** (p272), a quaint small town on an island in the Lago de Petén Itzá. From Flores, head for **Tikal** (p287), the most majestic of all Maya sites. Spend a night at Tikal itself or nearby **El Remate** (p284). While in the Flores-Tikal area, you should have time to take in further impressive Maya sites such as **Yaxhá** (p298) and **Uaxactún** (p295).

From Flores head southwest to the relaxed riverside town of **Sayaxché** (p301), which is at the center of another group of intriguing Maya sites – **Ceibal** (p302), **Aguateca** (p304) and **Dos Pilas** (p305). The road south from Sayaxché is now paved all the way to **Chisec** (p223) and **Cobán** (p213), jumping-off points for a whole series of pristine natural wonders such as jungle-ringed **Laguna Lachuá** (p224), the **Grutas de Lanquín** (p221) and the turquoise lagoons and waterfalls of **Semuc Champey** (p222).

This 1900km round trip takes you to all the top destinations in the center, east and north of the country. Really pushing, you might do it in two weeks, but if you have four, you'll enjoy it more.



HAMMOCK FRENZY

One week / Tilapita to Las Lisas

The beaches in Guatemala take some getting used to. Black volcanic sand makes them look dirty (and some are), but there are plenty of small, laid-back towns that are great for splashing around, surfing, cruising the mangroves and just generally chilling out. There's no coast road as such, so you'll find yourself popping in and out from the main highway all the way down the coast.

Starting way up near the Mexican border, make your way to **Tilapita** (p187), not to be confused with Tilapa – the former is far prettier, with exactly one hotel at the time of writing.

From there it's back out onto the highway, east to Mazatenango and on another bus for **Tulate** (p194), the best beach along here for swimming and bodysurfing. From Tulate, there's no need to go back to the main highway – just catch a bus back to La Máquina, then another on to **Chiquistepeque** (p195), a lovely, untouched stretch of beach where some visitors like to volunteer with the French-Guatemalan NGO, Proyecto Hamaca y Pescado, who work with the local community.

Moving on, it's back out to the highway, heading east with a bus change in Siquinala for the surfers' haven of **Sipacate** (p198).

The road could end at your next stop, **Monterrico** (p201), favorite of Guatemalan weekenders and Antigua language students alike. If you haven't had enough yet, make your way to **Las Lisas** (p204), where a gorgeous, exclusive island getaway near the Salvadoran border awaits.

It's only 220km as the turtle swims from the Mexican border to the Salvadoran border – you could do it in a week, but what's the rush?



ROADS LESS TRAVELED

ACROSS THE IXCÁN

Two Days / Huehuetenango to Laguna Lachuá

Now that the road from Huehuetenango to Cobán is questionable due to landslides, adventure junkies and chicken-bus lovers have been turning northwards to make the trip across country without backtracking to the capital.

The route from Huehue to Laguna Lachuá pushes all the right buttons for these folks – bad roads, stunning scenery, fascinating villages and very, very few tourists.

Buses run, but less frequently than elsewhere. If you're thinking about going this route, you should have some spare time and be prepared to rumble around in the back of a pickup truck now and then.

Starting from **Huehuetenango** (p175) it's an easy, scenic ride up into the Cuchumatanes on a good road to **Soloma** (p183). Say goodbye to the asphalt here. From Soloma the road undulates over hills before reaching **Santa Eulalia** (p183), a pretty and interesting town where you may want to pause for a couple of hours.

Then it's up again, through pastures and pine forests to the town of **San Mateo Ixtatán** (p183), a good place to break for the night because transport drops off in the late afternoon and there are a few interesting sights around town.

Next day, it's a slow cruise downhill to **Barillas** (p184), from where you should be able to grab a bus or at least a pickup for the terrible-roads-but-great-scenery ride across to **Playa Grande** (p224) and **Laguna Lachuá** (p224).



There are serious plans to put in a highway along this 150km stretch between Huehue and Playa Grande – get in while the adventure's still alive!

TAILORED TRIPS

THE MAYA THEN & NOW

While in **Guatemala City** (p63), don't miss the museums dedicated to Maya archaeology and textiles. This is also a good jumping-off point for visits to Maya ruins at **Quiriguá** (p236) and, just over the Honduras border, **Copán** (p239).

West of Guatemala City are the ruins at **Iximché** (p117), and **Lago de Atitlán** (p116), surrounded by traditional villages such as **Santiago Atitlán** (p130). Don't miss the big Maya market at **Chichicastenango** (p143), also the scene of unique religious practices. To the north is the old K'iche' Maya capital **K'umarcaaj** (p149), still an important center for Maya rites. **Quetzaltenango** (p157) is a base for visiting many traditional villages and the sacred **Laguna Chicabal** (p175). Further north is the old Mam Maya capital, **Zaculeu** (p176), en route to **Todos Santos Cuchumatán** (p180), a mountain village with strong traditions and uniquely striking costumes.

Along the mountain roads of the Cuchumatanes ranges you'll find **Nebaj** (p153), a center of the colorful Ixil Maya, and **San Cristóbal Verapaz** (p220). **Sayaxché** (p301), in the north of Guatemala, is a good base for exploring several nearby Maya sites. From here you can visit the mother of all Maya cities, **Tikal** (p287), and in the Petén jungles there are plenty of opportunities for exploring more remote archaeological sites.



NATURAL WONDERS

Tone up your muscles by climbing a couple of the volcanoes that surround **Antigua** (p96). Nearby, **Lago de Atitlán** (p116) is certainly one of the most beautiful lakes in the world. There are more volcanoes around Quetzaltenango – check out **Santa María** (p161) and **Tajumulco** (p161), the highest peak in Central America. To the north you can experience the beauty of the Cuchumatanes mountains around **Todos Santos Cuchumatán** (p180) and **Nebaj** (p153). Nearby **Cobán** (p213) is a great stepping stone for visiting the lovely lagoons and

waterfalls of **Semuc Champey** (p222), along with cave exploration and wildlife-watching galore. If you've got some time, don't miss the jungle-surrounded **Laguna Lachuá** (p224). To the north, in the thick jungles of El Petén, is the magnificent ancient Maya city of **Tikal** (p287), along with the ruins around **El Perú** (p306) – both are also fine spots for observing tropical wildlife. In the western part of the country, pause for cave exploration at **Finca Ixobel** (p271), take a boat ride along the beautiful, jungle-shrouded **Río Dulce** (p264) or enjoy a side trip to the **Refugio Bocas del Polochic** (p256), which supports more than 300 bird species.



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