

The Pacific Slope



Divided from the highlands by a chain of volcanoes, the flatlands that run down to the Pacific are known universally as La Costa. It's a sultry region – hot and wet or hot and dry, depending on the time of year – with rich volcanic soil good for growing coffee at higher elevations and palm-oil seeds and sugarcane lower down.

Archaeologically, the big draws here are Takalik Abaj and the sculptures left by pre-Olmec civilizations around Santa Lucía Cotzumalguapa.

The culture is overwhelmingly *ladino* (of mixed European and indigenous heritage), and even the biggest towns are humble affairs, with low-rise wooden or concrete houses and the occasional palm-thatched roof.

A fast highway, the Carretera al Pacífico (Hwy 2), roughly parallels the coast all the way from Ciudad Tecún Umán on the Mexican border to Ciudad Pedro de Alvarado on the El Salvador border. The 250km from Ciudad Tecún Umán to Guatemala City can be covered in five hours by bus – much less than the 345km of the Interamericana (Hwy 1) through the highlands from La Mesilla.

Guatemalan beach tourism is seriously underdeveloped. Monterrico is the only real contender in this field, helped along by a nature reserve protecting mangroves and their inhabitants. Almost every town on the beach has places to stay, although more often than not they're very basic affairs. Sipacate gets the best waves and is slowly developing as a surf resort, although serious surfers find much more joy in Mexico or El Salvador.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Getting away from absolutely everything at the one-hotel town of **Tilapita** (p187)
- Investigating the bridge in history between the Olmec and the Maya while strolling through the grassy **Parque Arqueológico Takalik Abaj** (p192)
- Spotting wildlife among the mangrove-lined canal and lagoons of the **Biotopo Monterrico-Hawaii** (p201)
- Checking out the big mysterious heads carved by the non-Maya Pipil culture at **Santa Lucía Cotzumalguapa** (p195)
- Getting wet at **Parque Acuático Xocomil** (p192) and dizzy at **Parque de Diversiones Xetulul** (p192), two fun parks near Retalhuleu



History

Despite it being one of the first settled areas in Guatemala, relatively little is known about the Pacific region's early history. Many archaeological sites are presumed overgrown by jungle; others have been destroyed to make way for agriculture.

What is known is that the Olmecs were among the first to arrive, followed by the Ocós and Iztapa, whose cultures appear to have flourished around 1500 BC.

Although these cultures were much more humble than those of their northerly counterparts, they developed a level of sophistication in stone carving and ceramics. It's also thought that the coastal region acted as a conduit, passing cultural advances (like the formation of writing and the Maya calendar) from north to south.

Between AD 400 and 900, the Pipil moved in, most likely displaced by the turmoil in the Mexican highlands, and began farming cacao, which they used to make a (rather bitter) chocolate drink. They also used cacao beans as currency.

Towards the end of the Postclassic period, the K'iche', Kaqchiquel and Tz'utujil indigenous groups began moving in as population expansion in Guatemala's highlands had made food become scarce and land squabbles common.

Pedro de Alvarado, the first Spaniard to land in Guatemala, arrived here in 1524, pausing briefly to fight the K'iche' as a sort of forerunner to a much larger battle around present-day Quetzaltenango. Franciscan missionaries were dispatched to the region and began a lengthy, largely unsuccessful attempt to convert the locals.

Further agricultural projects (mostly indigo and cacao) were started around this time, but it wasn't until independence that the region became one of the country's main agricultural suppliers, with plantations of coffee, bananas, rubber and sugarcane.

In the languid tropical climate here, not much changes, particularly the social structure. The distribution of land – a few large landholders and many poorly paid, landless farm workers – can be traced back to these early post-independence days. You'll see the outcome as you travel around the region – large mansions and opulent gated communities alongside squalid, makeshift workers' huts.

CIUDAD TECÚN UMÁN

This is the preferable and busier of the two Pacific Slope border crossings, having better transport connections with other places in Guatemala. A bridge links Ciudad Tecún Umán with Ciudad Hidalgo (Mexico). The border is open 24 hours daily, and several basic hotels and restaurants are available, but you should aim to be clear of the border well before dark. The town has all the trademarks of the seedy border town. Banks here change US dollars and traveler's checks.

From Ciudad Tecún Umán frequent buses depart until about 6pm along the Carretera al Pacífico to Coatepeque, Retalhuleu, Mazatenango, Escuintla and Guatemala City. There are direct buses to Quetzaltenango (Q35, 3½ hours) up until about 2pm. If you don't find a bus to your destination, take one to Coatepeque or, better, Retalhuleu, and change buses there. On the Mexican side, buses run from Ciudad Hidalgo to the city of Tapachula (M\$15, 50 minutes) every 10 minutes, 4:30am to 10pm.

EL CARMEN

A bridge across the Río Suchiate connects El Carmen with Talismán (Mexico). The border is open 24 hours daily. It's generally easier and more convenient to cross at Tecún Umán. There are few services at El Carmen, and those are very basic. Most buses between here and the rest of Guatemala go via Ciudad Tecún Umán, 39km south, and then along the Carretera al Pacífico through Coatepeque, Retalhuleu and Escuintla. On the way to Ciudad Tecún Umán, most stop at Malacatán on the road to San Marcos and Quetzaltenango, so you could try looking for a bus to Quetzaltenango there, but it's more dependable to change at Coatepeque (Q20, two hours from El Carmen) or Retalhuleu.

On the Mexican side, minibuses run every 10 minutes between Talismán and Tapachula, from 5am to 9pm (M\$10).

TILAPITA

Just south of the Mexican border, this little fishing village is the place to come for some seriously laid-back beach time. There's exactly one hotel here (and it's a good one) and it's a world away from the often hectic, scruffy feel of other towns along the coast.

The village, which sits on a sandbar cut off from the mainland by the Ocós estuary,