



# Central & Eastern Guatemala

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## Why Go?

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 Sea, this is Guatemala's most diverse region.

The Carretera al Atlántico (Hwy 9) shoots eastward to the sea from Guatemala City, passing the turnoffs for the wonderfully preserved ruins of Copán in Honduras; Quiriguá, with its impressive stelae; and Río Dulce, a favored resting spot for Caribbean sailors and gateway to the wilds of the Refugio Bocas del Pochic (Bocas del Pochic Wildlife Reserve). While you're here don't miss the gorgeous boat ride down the Río Dulce to Livingston, the enclave of the Garífuna people.

The north of the region is lush and mountainous coffee-growing country. The limestone crags around Cobán attract cavers the world over, and the beautiful pools and cascades of Semuc Champey rate high on Guatemala's list of natural wonders.

## When to Go

Encompassing a huge area, measuring about one quarter of Guatemala's land mass, the climate is predictably diverse here – Cobán and the Alta Verapaz are best avoided in the cooler months from November to February, as many of the attractions involve swimming. Garífuna National Day in Livingston at the end of November is worth putting on your calendar, as is Cobán's Rabin Ajau festival in July.

Bird-watchers hoping to see Guatemala's national bird, the quetzal, will have better luck during their laying period from March to June. Accommodation prices remain relatively stable throughout the year, with the usual exceptions of steep hikes during Christmas and Easter.

## ALTA & BAJA VERAPAZ

Hwy 14 (also marked Hwy 17) leaves Hwy 9 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.

### Salamá & Around

A wonderful introduction to Baja Verapaz's not-too-hot, not-too-cold climate, the area around Salamá hosts a wealth of attractions, both post-Colonial and indigenous.

The town itself is known for its ornate church (complete with grisly depiction of Jesus), bustling Sunday market and the photogenic ex-sugar-mill-turned-museum and impressive stone aqueduct in the neighboring town of San Jerónimo.

Salamá has some fine accommodation options, including the **Posada de Don Maco** (☎7940-0083; 3a Calle 8-26; s/d Q110/140; ☐) and the **Hotel Real Legendario** (☎7940-0501; 8a Av 3-57; s/d Q140/150; ☐☎). There are restaurants and cafes around the plaza. The meat-stuffed flour tortillas at **Antojitos**

**Zacapanecos** (cnr 6a Calle & 8a Av; mains Q20; ☎10am-9pm) are not to be missed. For caving, bird-watching, hiking, horseback riding and orchid trips, get in touch with **EcoVerapaz** (☎5722-9095; ecoverapaz@hotmail.com; 8a Av 7-12, Zona 1; 1-day tour per person Q350). Buses leave Salamá's downtown bus terminal frequently for Cobán (Q25, 1½ to two hours), Guatemala City (Q35 to Q50, three hours) and neighboring villages.

Salamá also marks the starting point for a back-roads route to Guatemala City, passing Rabinal, whose annual **fiesta of San Pedro** (January 19 to 25) is a beguiling mix of pre-Colombian and Catholic traditions, and Cubulco where the *palo volador* (flying pole) tradition is still observed. There are basic, adequate *pensiones* (family-run guesthouses) in both Rabinal and Cubulco.

From there it's 100km south to Guatemala City, passing the turn-off to **Mixco Viejo**, one of the least-visited and most spectacularly sited Maya sites in the country. The former Poqomam capital, it lies wedged between deep ravines with just one way in and one way out; the Poqomam further fortified the site by constructing impressive rock walls around the city. It took Pedro de Alvarado and his troops more than a month of concerted attacks to conquer it. When they finally succeeded, they furiously laid waste to this city, which scholars believe supported close to 10,000 people at its height. There are several temples and two ball courts here.

### Salto de Chalisco

What's claimed to be Central America's highest **waterfall** (admission Q15) lies 12km down a dirt road from a turnoff at Km 145 on Hwy 14 to Cobán. At 130m and surrounded by cloud forest, it's an impressive sight, especially if it's been raining and the fall is running at full force. Another waterfall, the **Lomo de Macho**, lies 8km away – an enjoyable walk, or you can hire a horse from the visitor center in town (about 5km from the falls). Previously, you could stay here as part of a **community tourism project** (☎5301-8928; per person Q75), in a rustic bunkhouse attached to the visitor center, but administrative problems saw the project suspended at the time of writing. It may be running again by the time you read this. Buses to Chalisco leave every half hour from Salamá (Q15, 1½ hours), passing La Cumbre Santa Elena (Q10, 45 minutes) on Hwy 14.