



The Pacific Slope

Includes ➔

Tilapita	157
Retalhuleu	160
Champerico	164
Mazatenango	164
Tulate	164
Chiquistepeque	165
Santa Lucía	165
Cotzumalguapa	165
La Democracia	168
Sipacate	169
Escuintla	169
Iztapa	170
Monterrico	171
Cuilapa	175
Lago de Amatitlán	175

Why Go?

Separated from the highlands by a chain of volcanoes, the flatlands that run down to the Pacific are universally known 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, palm-oil seeds and sugarcane.

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* (mixed indigenous and European heritage), and even the biggest towns are humble affairs, with low-rise houses and the occasional palm-thatched roof.

Guatemalan beach tourism is seriously underdeveloped. Monterrico is the only real contender, helped along by a nature reserve protecting mangroves and their inhabitants. Sipacate is slowly developing as a surf resort, although serious surfers find more joy in Mexico or El Salvador.

When to Go

You can't escape the heat on the coast, although temperatures do get a little more moderate from November to March. Beaches pack out on weekends and places like Monterrico will often double their room rates. Guatemalans love the beach for the main vacation periods – Easter and Christmas – and booking accommodation around this time is a very good idea. The Pacific surf is rough at any time of year, but surfers find the best waves towards the end of hurricane season, late October through to November.

Best Places to Eat

- ➔ Taberna El Pelicano (p173)
- ➔ Cafetería La Luna (p161)
- ➔ Max Café (p160)
- ➔ Hotel Atelie del Mar (p173)

Best Places to Stay

- ➔ Takalik Maya Lodge (p163)
- ➔ Isleta de Gaia (p174)
- ➔ Hotel Pez de Oro (p173)
- ➔ Hotel Casa y Campo (p160)

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 made food 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.

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.

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, is only reachable by boat from the town of Tilapa. There's some excellent swimming to be had here, although as with all the beaches along this coast, the undertow can be quite serious and there are no lifeguards. If you're not a strong swimmer, don't go too far out.

There's not a whole lot to do (which is kind of the point), but local fishermen offer fascinating boat tours of the estuary, mangroves and adjoining **Reserva Natural El Manchón** for Q100 per boat per hour. There are no guarantees, but local wildlife includes iguanas, crocodiles, white herons, egrets and kingfishers.

Back in Tilapita, the **Tortugario Tilapita**, across the path from Hotel Pacific Mar, is fighting an uphill battle to preserve the local sea turtle population, and would be quite happy for whatever help they can get if you're looking for some volunteer work.

One of the best accommodation deals along the coast, **Hotel Pacific Mar** (☎ 5914-1524; www.playatilapa.com; s/d Q60/100; ☹) is nothing fancy, but it has decent-sized, clean concrete rooms. Delicious meals (Q50) are served in an oversized thatched-roof *palapa* (thatched palm-leaf shelter), and generally consist of the catch of the day – shrimp, fish and *caldo de mariscos* (seafood stew) are always a good bet. The good-sized swimming pool is a welcome addition, as things can get slightly warm here.

Coming from Tecún Umán, you might luck onto a direct minibus (Q10, 45 minutes) to Tilapa – if not, take any bus heading out of town, get off at the Tilapa turnoff and wait for an onward bus there. A much more scenic option is to take a bus to Ocós (Q12, 30 minutes) and a *lancha* (small boat; around Q20, 45 minutes) to Tilapita from there. Coming in the other direction, direct buses run from Coatepeque to Tilapa (Q10, 1½ hours). Once you get to Tilapa, turn left down the side street and follow it to the dock, where you will find *lanchas* waiting. The 10-minute ride to Tilapita costs Q10 per person in a shared *lancha*, or you can hire a private one to make the trip for Q50. Tell the *lanchero* you are going to *el hotel* (although he will probably know that already). If you get stuck, there are cheap, not-so-lovely hotels in Tilapa.