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Plan Your Trip

Central America's Top 18

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Lago de Atitlán, Guatemala

Central America's most picturesque crater lake

Possibly the single most beautiful destination in Guatemala, Atitlán (p112) elicits poetic outbursts from even the most seasoned traveler. The lake is ringed by volcanoes and villages such as Santiago Atitlán, with its thriving indigenous culture, and San Marcos La Laguna, humming with cosmic energy. Kayaking and hiking make a longer stay worthwhile. Above: Lago de Atitlán and Volcán de San Pedro (p118); right: Tzutujil woman wearing traditional hat



Volcán Arenal, Costa Rica

Iconic volcano and bubbling hot springs

While the molten night views are gone, this mighty, perfectly conical giant (p250) is still considered active and worthy of a pilgrimage. Whether shrouded in mist or bathed in sunshine, Arenal has several beautiful trails to explore, and at its base you're just a short drive away from its many hot springs, in which sore muscles are destined to be soothed. Even better, some of these springs are free, and any local can point the way.

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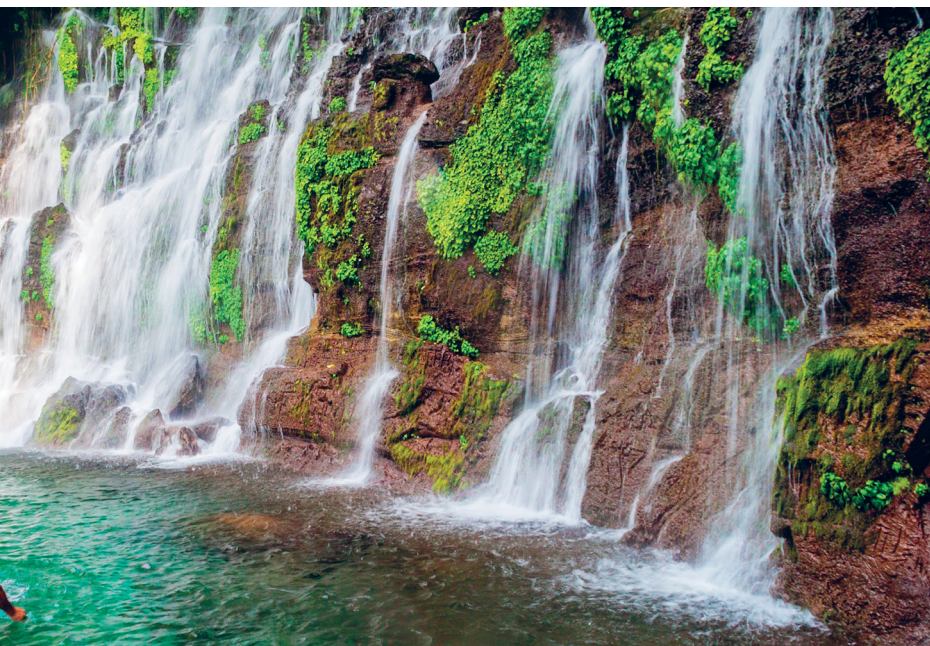


Tikal, Guatemala

Guatemala's remarkably restored jungle temples

You'll marvel at these temples' monumental size and architectural brilliance, particularly in the early morning at the Gran Plaza in Tikal (p126). It's a testament to the cultural and artistic heights scaled by this jungle civilization, which thrived for some 16 centuries. A highlight is the sky-high vantage provided by towering Templo IV, on the west edge of the precinct. Equally compelling is the abundance of wildlife.





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Chichén Itzá, Mexico's Yucatán

Mexico's most popular Maya sight

From the imposing, monolithic El Castillo pyramid (where the shadow of the plumed serpent god Kukulcán creeps down the staircase during the spring and autumn equinoxes) to the Sacred Cenote and curiously designed El Caracol, the legacy of Maya astronomers at Chichén Itzá (p64) will blow your mind. Admire the Platform of Skulls and the stone carvings at the Temple of Warriors, or come back at night for the sound-and-light show.