



Central America



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WHALE SHARK

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ON THE ROAD



NICARAGUA P429



ISLA DE OMETEPE,
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Itineraries



2
WEEKS

Northern Loop: Guatemala, Mexico & Belize

Rich in culture and coastline, this route loops through many of the region's northern highlights, including Maya ruins, reef snorkeling and jungle cruising.

From **Guatemala City**, head straight to colonial **Antigua**, fitting in a volcano climb and perhaps a crash course in Spanish. At **Lago de Atitlán** go for a few days of hiking and swimming in the new-age magnet **San Marcos La Laguna**. Then continue on to **Chichicastenango** to see the famous Maya market.

Venture north to Mexico on a Chiapas loop, exploring the colonial city of **San Cristóbal de las Casas** and nearby Maya villages, as well as the jungle-set Maya ruins at **Palenque**. Make your way back to Guatemala and **Tikal**, the mother of all Maya sites.

Bus east to Belize, stopping to go river tubing or caving outside hilly **San Ignacio**, before splashing into the Caribbean – and the barrier reef near either **Hopkins** or **Caye Caulker**. From **Punta Gorda**, catch a *lancha* (small motorboat) to **Livingston**, starting point for a serious jungle river cruise to **Río Dulce**. From there, hop one of the frequent buses back to Guatemala City.



Southern Sampler: Sea, City & Countryside

Not everybody gets ample vacation time, and Central America is tough to squeeze into a week. But for those hungry for a three-in-one trip involving some beach bumming, countryside and a splash of colonial character, here's one way it can be done.

Touch down into Panama's top tourist draw, the **Bocas del Toro** archipelago, where you can shimmy through the emerald-green Caribbean, spying on sea life and communing with coral, and then stalk monkeys and sloths in Parque Nacional Marino Isla Bastimentos or chill on the vanilla sands of Red Frog Beach. In the evening, you'll devour fresh seafood by candlelight before sucking down potent cocktails and partying the night away in Bocas Town or on Isla Carenero. After a couple of days of snorkeling and island exploration, hop a plane to Costa Rica's lush and undulating **Central Valley**.

Forget the gritty capital and instead point those wheels for the verdant highlands that surround it, opting either for the storybook **Valle de Orosi** and its well-paved 32km loop through rolling hills, terraced coffee plantations and pastoral villages, or the strawberry-studded hills of **Poás** and its fussy, namesake volcano (best visited early in the morning). A stay at **Peace Lodge**, with its wonderful animal rescue project, will introduce you to the country's fauna and some epic waterfalls. Save time for relaxing in the cave-like showers (with a waterfall option!) and the bubbling hot tubs.

Another short plane ride away is Nicaragua's capital city (skip this too), which is just an hour from the colonial gem of **Granada**. Here you can stroll down postcard-perfect cobblestone streets lined with magnificent churches, or cruise around Lake Nicaragua's islets, which were formed thousands of years ago by the erupting Mombacho Volcano. You can also help support locals by visiting a nearby community-tourism project, or check out an impressive collection of petroglyphs and statues in Parque Nacional Archipiélago Zapatera.



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Top: Detail, Tulum Ruins (p70), Mexico

Bottom: Reserva Biológica Bosque Nuboso Monteverde (p562), Costa Rica



4

WEEKS

Pacific Coast: El Salvador to Panama

This sinuous coastline has something to suit everyone, from insatiable surfers to dedicated beach bums. Inland there are coffee farms, cloud forests and even more diverse landscapes. Let your spirit soar on this itinerary that takes in four countries, countless monster curls and infinite adventure. In El Salvador and Nicaragua, peak surf season is March to December, while further south it's February to March.

Arrive in San Salvador and beam to **La Costa del Bálsamo**, home to world-class surf breaks; Playas El Zonte and Sunzal offer reasonable seaside digs and lessons for budding boarders. Take a detour to the **Ruta de las Flores**, where you can hike to hidden waterfalls and discover the region's culinary delights.

Moving east, cross the border(s) to Nicaragua. Stop in offbeat **León** for a dose of art and eclecticism. From **Managua**, catch a shuttle to **San Juan del Sur**, a chilled-out town ringed by beaches with big waves. You're also within striking distance of **Isla de Ometepe**, an island packed with opportunities for adventure.

Continue south to **Liberia**, Costa Rica and veer west to hit some surf spots on the Península de Nicoya. **Playa Grande** is a long, pristine stretch of sand, where you can catch waves by day and spy on nesting turtles at night. Hardy souls should brave the bumpy ride to the southern tip of the peninsula, where **Mal País and Santa Teresa** offer some of the best breaks in the region. The gorgeous beach and easygoing vibe are beacons for surfers, yogis and free spirits of all types. Nearby Cabo Blanco was Costa Rica's first nationally protected nature reserve – it's still worth a day trip.

Take a shortcut to the mainland with a ferry to **Puntarenas**. Hardcore surfers should continue south to the waves of **Dominical**. Alternatively, an inland jaunt to **Monteverde** offers cooler temperatures, canopy tours and magical cloud forest. From there head east to Panama. If you missed Monteverde, take a detour to **Boquete**, another mountain town with cool air and strong coffee. Otherwise, make for **Santa Catalina** and its Hawaii-style waves. From **Santiago**, bus it to **Panama City** or David.

4
WEEKS

Caribbean Coast: Mexico to Nicaragua

Explore the 'other side' of Central America – where Spanish is heard less than English or Kriol, and Latin beats give way to reggae rhythms and Garifuna drumming. This east-coast route shows off the rich cultural blend and wild natural scenery that make the Caribbean unique.

Fly into **Cancún**, maybe hit up a salsa club, and start working your way south. Your first stop is **Tulum**, an impressive Maya ruin set on prime beachfront property. Next, head south to **Mahahual** to snorkel the largest coral atoll in the northern hemisphere.

From **Chetumal**, catch a boat to chilled-out, budget-friendly **Caye Caulker**, Belize for some days of sunning, swimming and snorkeling. Return to the mainland via **Belize City**, perhaps sneaking in a side-trip to the **Belize Zoo**. If you're up for some more island-hopping, catch the bus to **Dangriga**, from where you can get a boat to Tobacco Caye. Here you can snorkel right off the shore, and there are plenty of hammocks to go around afterward. **Hopkins** is also a laid-back Garifuna town with a beach, if you prefer to stay on the mainland.

You'll save yourself some time and hassle if you can catch the weekly boat from **Placencia** direct to **Puerto Cortés**, Honduras. Otherwise, continue south through Toledo to Punta Gorda to catch a more frequent boat to **Puerto Barrios**, Guatemala. Then take a minibus to the Honduras border at **Corinto**.

Buses run to **La Ceiba**, via San Pedro Sula. Along this coastline, there are countless attractions that are unique to this region, including river-rafting on the **Río Cangrejal** and visiting the Garifuna village of **Sambo Creek**. The **Bay Islands** are an absolute must for divers (or would-be divers).

And now, you have reached the final frontier: **The Moskitia**. This huge expanse of untamed wilderness is inhabited in only a few isolated places. If you're curious, consider signing up for a tour to the Moskitia (available in La Ceiba) – there are few roads there and plenty of crime.



2 WEEKS

The Center of Central America

This route explores the less-traveled, less-costly and lesser-known countries of Central America, taking in two coastlines and all the spectacular scenery in between.

From **Guatemala City**, journey east over the El Salvador border to Tacuba, start of the **Ruta de las Flores**, replete with hiking trails and food festivals. From **Sonsonate**, turn south toward **La Costa del Bálsamo** for a few days of riding waves and catching rays in **La Libertad**. Stop in **San Salvador** to sample the country's best nightlife, before heading east to **Playa El Cuco** for a quirky (and eco-conscious) stay at La Tortuga Verde.

Turn north and cross into Honduras, heading toward **Lago de Yojoa** to search for quetzals in the cloud forest. Continue north to **La Ceiba**, the jumping-off point for the region's star diving destination – the **Bay Islands**. **Utila** offers the chance to spot enormous whale sharks suspended in the big blue.

Head back to Guatemala, but not before a stop in the cobblestone town of **Copán Ruinas**, which offers river-tubing, mountain horseback rides and namesake ruins.



2 WEEKS

Southern Loop

From volcano climbs to barefoot beach towns, southern Central America offers equal parts adventure and R&R. The green giant, Costa Rica, is flanked by two vibrant countries with colonial character and off-the-beaten-path allure.

Starting in **San José**, Costa Rica journey to hippie haven **Puerto Viejo de Talamanca** for good food, surf and rainforest rich in wildlife. Cross the Panamanian border and hop on a boat to the sugar-sand beaches of **Bocas del Toro**. From here turn south to **Boquete** and slog up **Volcán Barú** for 360-degree views.

Back in Costa Rica, stop off in free-wheeling **Dominical** for a surf and a yoga session, then cut over to the Pacific coast to explore the monkey-crowded trails and picture-perfect beaches in **Manuel Antonio**. Continue up the Interamericana and into Nicaragua. Test the surf and swing in a hammock in laid-back **San Juan del Sur**, then rest up for an adventure on **Isla de Ometepe**, a volcanic island in a sea-sized lake. Follow up with a trip to admire the colonial architecture in **Granada**, before heading on to **Managua** to grab a direct bus back to San José.

Central America: Off the Beaten Track

SANTA CLARA & DZILAM DE BRAVO

Time seems to stand still on the breezy beaches of Santa Clara and Dzilam de Bravo, east of Mérida. These sands of solitude are a welcome sight in a region where tourist centers abound.

SANTA CLARA & DZILAM DE BRAVO

Río Lagartos
Cancún
Playa del Carmen
Valladolid
Mérida
Celestún
Campeche
Felipe Carrillo Puerto

TOLEDO DISTRICT

The deep south of Belize is home to remote Maya villages, crumbling ruins and little-visited national parks and reserves. (p283)

BELMOPAN
Flores
TOLEDO DISTRICT
Belize City
Dangriga

LAGUNITA CREEK

Kayak and swim your way through the turquoise waterways surrounding this remote ecotourism project located on the Río Sarstun, northwest of Livingston.

LAGUNITA CREEK
Barrios
Chiquimula
Gracias
Santa Ana
GUATEMALA CITY
SAN SALVADOR
La Libertad

PERQUÍN

Cool mountain air, rugged hiking trails and real war stories await those who make the effort to reach this former guerrilla stronghold near the border in El Salvador. (p339)

PERQUÍN
TEGUCIGALPA
Ocotul
Estelí
Chinandega
MANAGUA
Rivas

PARQUE NACIONAL COIBA

With extraordinary marine wildlife, Panama's newest Unesco World Heritage Site was once its most infamous island prison. Untrampled and pristine, it offers excellent diving and wildlife-watching. (p654)

PACIFIC OCEAN



SARTENEJA

Stroll the shoreline to admire the wooden sailboats still constructed here and explore the nearby Shipstern Nature Reserve, a hub of birding, fishing and wildlife-watching. (p259)

TRUJILLO

The best slice of Honduras' Caribbean coastline is a gorgeous place, with lots of history, a delightful end-of-the-road feel, and some of the mainland's best beaches nearby. (p402)

PEARL KEYS

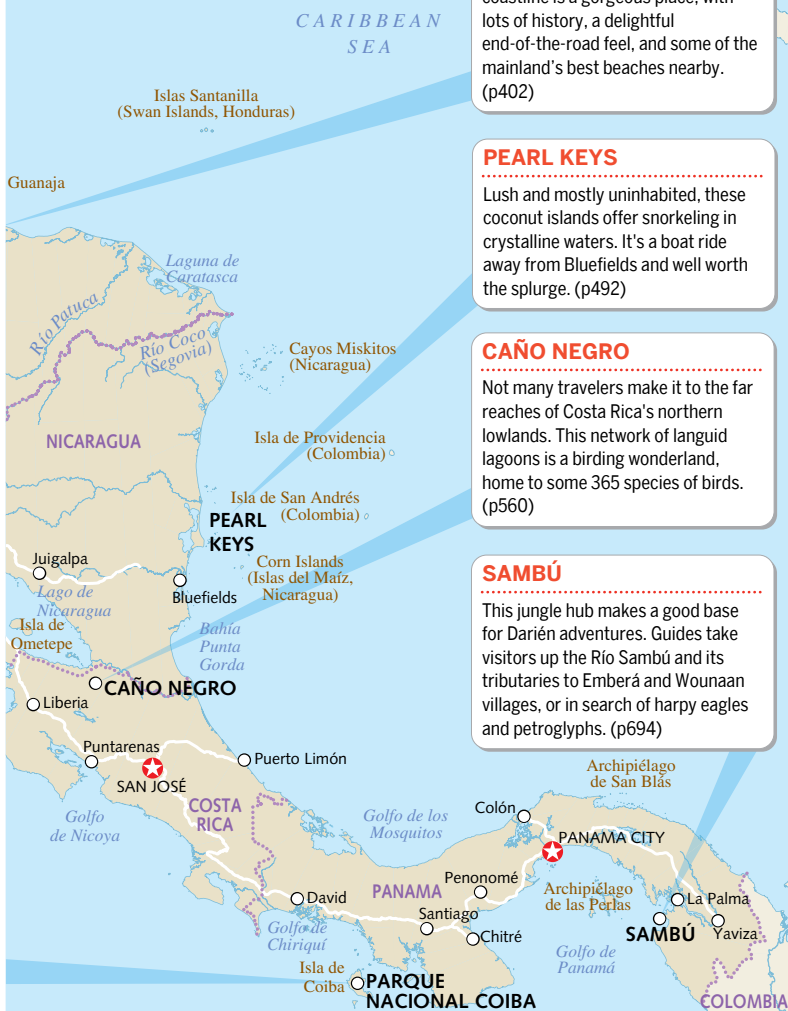
Lush and mostly uninhabited, these coconut islands offer snorkeling in crystalline waters. It's a boat ride away from Bluefields and well worth the splurge. (p492)

CAÑO NEGRO

Not many travelers make it to the far reaches of Costa Rica's northern lowlands. This network of languid lagoons is a birding wonderland, home to some 365 species of birds. (p560)

SAMBÚ

This jungle hub makes a good base for Darién adventures. Guides take visitors up the Río Sambú and its tributaries to Emberá and Wounaan villages, or in search of harpy eagles and petroglyphs. (p694)



Behind the Scenes

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THIS BOOK

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Map Legend

Sights

- Beach
- Bird Sanctuary
- Buddhist
- Castle/Palace
- Christian
- Confucian
- Hindu
- Islamic
- Jain
- Jewish
- Monument
- Museum/Gallery/Historic Building
- Ruin
- Shinto
- Sikh
- Taoist
- Winery/Vineyard
- Zoo/Wildlife Sanctuary
- Other Sight

Activities, Courses & Tours

- Bodysurfing
- Diving
- Canoeing/Kayaking
- Course/Tour
- Sento Hot Baths/Onsen
- Skiing
- Snorkeling
- Surfing
- Swimming/Pool
- Walking
- Windsurfing
- Other Activity

Sleeping

- Sleeping
- Camping
- Hut/Shelter

Eating

- Eating

Drinking & Nightlife

- Drinking & Nightlife
- Cafe

Entertainment

- Entertainment

Shopping

- Shopping

Information

- Bank
- Embassy/Consulate
- Hospital/Medical
- Internet
- Police
- Post Office
- Telephone
- Toilet
- Tourist Information
- Other Information

Geographic

- Beach
- Gate
- Hut/Shelter
- Lighthouse
- Lookout
- Mountain/Volcano
- Oasis
- Park
- Pass
- Picnic Area
- Waterfall

Population

- Capital (National)
- Capital (State/Province)
- City/Large Town
- Town/Village

Transport

- Airport
- Border crossing
- Bus
- Cable car/Funicular
- Cycling
- Ferry
- Metro station
- Monorail
- Parking
- Petrol station
- Subway/Subte station
- Taxi
- Train station/Railway
- Tram
- Underground station
- Other Transport

Routes

- Tollway
- Freeway
- Primary
- Secondary
- Tertiary
- Lane
- Unsealed road
- Road under construction
- Plaza/Mall
- Steps
- Tunnel
- Pedestrian overpass
- Walking Tour
- Walking Tour detour
- Path/Walking Trail

Boundaries

- International
- State/Province
- Disputed
- Regional/Suburb
- Marine Park
- Cliff
- Wall

Hydrography

- River, Creek
- Intermittent River
- Canal
- Water
- Dry/Salt/Intermittent Lake
- Reef

Areas

- Airport/Runway
- Beach/Desert
- Cemetery (Christian)
- Cemetery (Other)
- Glacier
- Mudflat
- Park/Forest
- Sight (Building)
- Sportsground
- Swamp/Mangrove

Note: Not all symbols displayed above appear on the maps in this book



Tom Masters

Nicaragua Dreaming since he could walk of going to the most obscure places on earth, Tom has always had a taste for the unknown. This has led to a writing career that has taken him all over the world, including North Korea, the Arctic, Congo and Siberia. Despite a childhood spent in the English countryside, as an adult Tom has always called London, Paris and Berlin home. He currently lives in Berlin and can be found online at www.tommasters.net.



Carolyn McCarthy

Panama Carolyn McCarthy specializes in travel, culture and adventure in the Americas. She has written for *National Geographic*, *Outside*, *BBC Magazine*, *Sierra Magazine*, *Boston Globe* and other publications. A former Fulbright fellow and Banff Mountain Grant recipient, she has documented life in the most remote corners of Latin America. Carolyn has contributed to more than 40 guidebooks and anthologies for Lonely Planet, including *Colorado, USA*, *Argentina, Chile*,

Trekking in the Patagonian Andes, *Panama*, *Peru* and *USA National Parks* guides. For more information, visit www.carolynmccarthy.org or follow her Instagram travels @mccarthyoffmap.



Regis St Louis

Regis grew up in a small town in the American Midwest – the kind of place that fuels big dreams of travel – and he developed an early fascination with foreign dialects and world cultures. He spent his formative years learning Russian and a handful of Romance languages, which served him well on journeys across much of the globe. Regis has contributed to more than 50 Lonely Planet titles, covering destinations across six continents. His travels have taken him from the mountains of Kamchatka to remote island villages in Melanesia, and to many grand urban landscapes.

When not on the road, he lives in New Orleans. Follow him on www.instagram.com/regisstlouis. Regis contributed to the Panama chapter.

**Paul Clammer**

Guatemala Paul has worked as a molecular biologist, tour leader and travel writer. Since 2003 he has worked as a guidebook author for Lonely Planet, contributing to over 25 Lonely Planet titles, covering destinations that include swathes of South and Central Asia, West and North Africa and the Caribbean. In recent years he's lived in Morocco, Jordan, Haiti and Fiji, as well as his native England. Find him online at paulclammer.com or on Twitter as @paulclammer.

**Steve Fallon**

Panama A native of Boston, Massachusetts, Steve graduated from Georgetown University with a Bachelor of Science in modern languages. After working for several years for an American daily newspaper and earning a master's degree in journalism, his fascination with the 'new' Asia led him to Hong Kong, where he lived for over a dozen years, working for a variety of media and running his own travel bookshop. Steve lived in Budapest for three years before moving to London in 1994. He has written or contributed to more than 100 Lonely Planet titles. Steve is a qualified London Blue Badge Tourist Guide. Visit his website on www.steveslondon.com.

**Bridget Gleeson**

Bridget has written and taken photos for a variety of web and print publications including Lonely Planet, BBC Travel, BBC Culture, the *Guardian*, Budget Travel, *Afar*, *Wine Enthusiast*, Mr & Mrs Smith, *Jetsetter*, Tablet Hotels, the *Independent*, Delta Sky, Continental, LAN Airlines and Korean Air. She has lived in Italy, the Czech Republic, Nicaragua and Argentina. Bridget contributed the Nicaragua chapter.

**Paul Harding**

Belize As a writer and photographer, Paul has been traveling the globe for the best part of two decades, with an interest in remote and offbeat places, islands and cultures. He's an author and contributor to more than 50 Lonely Planet guides to countries and regions as diverse as India, Belize, Vanuatu, Iran, Indonesia, New Zealand, Iceland, Finland, Philippines and – his home patch – Australia.

**John Hecht**

Mexico's Yucatán & Chiapas Los Angeles native John has contributed to more than a dozen Lonely Planet guidebooks and trade publications, mostly focused on Mexico and Central America. He is also a published food and entertainment writer. He headed down Mexico way more than two decades ago and he's still livin' the Mexican dream in his adopted home of Mexico City.

**Anna Kaminski**

Nicaragua Originally from the Soviet Union, Anna grew up in Cambridge, UK. She graduated from the University of Warwick with a degree in Comparative American Studies, a background in the history, culture and literature of the Americas and the Caribbean, and an enduring love of Latin America. Her restless wanderings led her to settle briefly in Oaxaca and Bangkok and her flirtation with criminal law saw her volunteering as a lawyer's assistant in the courts, ghettos and prisons of Kingston, Jamaica. Anna has contributed to many Lonely Planet titles. When not on the road, Anna calls London home.

**Brian Kluepfel**

Costa Rica Brian has lived in three states and seven different residences by the time he was nine, and just kept moving, making stops in Berkeley, Bolivia, the Bronx and the 'burbs further down the line. His journalistic work across the Americas has ranged from the Copa America soccer tournament in Paraguay to an accordion festival in Quebec. Brian's titles for Lonely Planet include *Venezuela*, *Costa Rica*, *Bolivia* and *Ecuador*.



OUR STORY

A beat-up old car, a few dollars in the pocket and a sense of adventure. In 1972 that's all Tony and Maureen Wheeler needed for the trip of a lifetime – across Europe and Asia overland to Australia. It took several months, and at the end – broke but inspired – they sat at their kitchen table writing and stapling together their first travel guide, *Across Asia on the Cheap*. Within a week they'd sold 1500 copies. Lonely Planet was born.

Today, Lonely Planet has offices in Franklin, London, Melbourne, Oakland, Dublin, Beijing and Delhi, with more than 600 staff and writers. We share Tony's belief that 'a great guidebook should do three things: inform, educate and amuse'.

OUR WRITERS



Ashley Harrell

Belize After a brief stint selling day spa coupons door-to-door in South Florida, Ashley decided she'd rather be a writer. She went to journalism grad school, convinced a newspaper to hire her, and starting covering wildlife, crime and tourism, sometimes all in the same story. Fueling her zest for storytelling and the unknown, she traveled widely and moved often, from a tiny NYC apartment to a vast California ranch to a jungle cabin in Costa Rica, where she started writing

for Lonely Planet. From there her travels became more exotic and farther flung, and she still laughs when paychecks arrive. Ashley researched and wrote the Plan, Understand and Survival Guide sections. She also contributed to the Mexico's Yucatán & Chiapas and Honduras chapters.



Isabel Albiston

El Salvador After six years working for the *Daily Telegraph* in London, Isabel left to spend more time on the road. A job as writer for a magazine in Sydney, Australia was followed by a four-month overland trip across Asia and five years living and working in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Isabel started writing for Lonely Planet in 2014 and has contributed to many guidebooks. She's currently based in Ireland.



Ray Bartlett

Mexico's Yucatán & Chiapas; Guatemala Ray has been travel writing for nearly two decades, bringing Japan, Korea, Mexico, Tanzania, Guatemala, Indonesia, and many parts of the United States to life in rich detail for top-industry publishers, newspapers and magazines. His acclaimed debut novel, *Sunsets of Tulum*, set in Yucatán, was a Midwest Book Review 2016 Fiction pick. Among other pursuits, he surfs regularly and is an accomplished Argentine tango dancer. Follow him

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Celeste Brash

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OVER MORE
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