



Central America

on a shoestring



THIS EDITION WRITTEN AND RESEARCHED BY

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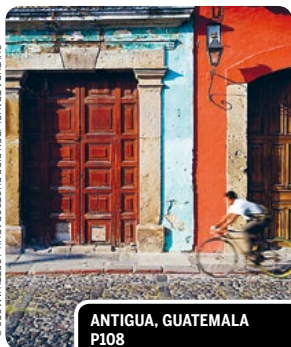
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PANAMA CITY P639



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On the Road



84°W

82°W

80°W

78°W

76°W

CARIBBEAN
SEA

20°N

18°N

Islas Santanilla
(Swan Islands, Honduras)

JAMAICA
KINGSTON

16°N

Guanaja

Corn Islands

Caribbean
on the cheap (p504)

Parque Nacional Tortuguero

Waterways and wildlife (p557)

Archipiélago de Bocas del Toro

Turquoise seas and fun (p679)

Panama City

Cosmopolitan capital and
Panama Canal (p639)

Parque Nacional Corcovado

Amazing biodiversity (p620)





Tom Spurling

El Salvador Tom Spurling has written 10 guidebooks for Lonely Planet on five continents. He lives in Western Australia with his wife and two children and teaches international students how to cut corners in life. For this book he returned to El Salvador where his memories evaporated down a volcano. He smuggled home green coffee beans in his suitcase and ocean cave bacteria in a foot wound. Tom's best travel advice is to go home sooner rather than later.



Iain Stewart

Honduras Iain's been traveling in Central America for the past two decades, first visiting Honduras back in 1993 (when Roatán really did feel like a pirate hangout). On this trip he enjoyed his time in the big cities thanks to the kindness of the creative, artistic Hondurans he met, but it was very special to find serenity in the Lenca highlands, sample artisan ale in Yojoa and Copán, and discover new routes through the nation's wonderful national parks.



Lucas Vidgen

Guatemala Lucas has been living in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, for nearly 10 years. He first arrived with the idea of studying Spanish for a couple of weeks and the rest is too much history to fit into this space. Lucas has contributed to a variety of Lonely Planet titles, mostly in Central and South America. When not writing for LP, he divides his time between other writing projects and working with two Quetzaltenango-based NGOs, EntreMundos and Solidaridad y Desarrollo.



Mara Vorhees

Costa Rica In 17 years of travel to Costa Rica, Mara has spotted 143 species of birds, all four New-World monkeys, anteaters, sloths and tapirs and one jaguarundi. This trip added a new element, as she traveled with her two-year-old twins. Mara has written many guidebooks for Lonely Planet, including *Costa Rica* and *Belize*. When not spying on sloths, she lives in Somerville, Massachusetts, with her husband, two kiddies and two kitties. Follow her adventures at www.havetwinswilltravel.com. Mara's work on the 5th edition of *Belize* contributed to this book's Belize chapter.

Read more about Mara at:
lonelyplanet.com/members/mvorhees

Contributing Writers



Sandra Bao Sandra is a Chinese-American born in Argentina who has traveled to nearly 60 countries on six continents. In 1990, she drove to Mexico with her future husband Ben Greensfelder and fell in love with the country. Since then she's travelled all around Mexico and especially the Yucatán, and is constantly amazed by the wonders this beautiful region has to offer. Over the past 12 years Sandra has contributed to a few dozen Lonely Planet titles to countries like Argentina, Venezuela, Mexico and the USA. Sandra's work on the 6th edition of *Cancún, Cozumel & the Yucatán* contributed to this book's Mexico's Yucatán & Chiapas chapter.



Alex Egerton A journalist by trade, Alex has been based in Nicaragua for almost a decade while working as a travel writer throughout Latin America. After exploring the villages, nature reserves and back roads from Nueva Segovia to Río San Juan, Alex moved to the Caribbean, bought a boat and settled down in Pearl Lagoon where the patchy internet is compensated for by the fresh breeze and fantastic food. When not on the road writing, he spends his spare time exploring Nicaragua's nature reserves on foot and by kayak. Alex's work on the 3rd edition of *Nicaragua* contributed to this book's Nicaragua chapter.



Daniel C Schechter A native New Yorker, Daniel called Mexico home for more than a decade. During that time he spanned the Mundo Maya on various forays from the capital, discovering and writing about such places as Campeche, Calakmul and Tikal and cultivating an enduring interest in Classic Maya history. Daniel currently resides in the Netherlands. Daniel's work on the 5th edition of *Guatemala* contributed to this book's Guatemala chapter.



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 Melbourne, London and Oakland, 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



Carolyn McCarthy

Coordinating Author, Panama Author of more than 20 travel guides, Carolyn McCarthy has been traveling the Americas and chronicling her experiences since 1998. For her third visit to Panama she sailed the Caribbean, sat out a riot in Panama City, became the subject of a Kuna congress meeting and managed to kayak the canal without one crocodile encounter. She also drank the water. She has written Lonely Planet's *Panama* country guide twice. Her work has also appeared in *National Geographic*, *Boston Globe*, *Outside*, *Patagon Journal* and other publications. Carolyn also wrote the Plan Your Trip section, and the Directory and Transportation chapters.



Greg Benchwick

Nicaragua Greg first traveled through Nicaragua in 1995 with an empty notebook and a backpack full of dreams. Since then he's written dozens of guidebooks to countries throughout Latin America, supported UN missions in Nicaragua and beyond, and discovered lost beaches and new stories one street over.

Read more about Greg at:
lonelyplanet.com/members/gbenchwick



Joshua Samuel Brown

Belize Born and raised in New York City, Joshua Samuel Brown has lived in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Beijing, Kunming, Singapore, Canada, Belize and America. He is the author of *Vignettes of Taiwan* (2005), coauthor of 10 travel guides for Lonely Planet and his work has appeared in numerous publications. His travel blog is Snarky Tofu (<http://josambro.blogspot.com>). When not on the road for Lonely Planet, Joshua writes comedy sketches, short stories and screenplays.



John Hecht

Mexico's Yucatán & Chiapas John headed down Mexico way more than two decades ago and much to mom's disappointment, he's still there. He spent the early years in Guadalajara but later bid farewell to the mariachi capital to take a reporting job at an English-language newspaper in Mexico City. He now works freelance and has done several travel writing assignments on the Yucatán Peninsula, including the latest edition of Lonely Planet's *Cancún, Cozumel & the Yucatán* and a series of short videos shot for Lonely Planet TV. Additionally, he has contributed to two editions of the Lonely Planet *Mexico* guide.

Read more about John at:
lonelyplanet.com/members/johnhecht

OVER MORE PAGE WRITERS

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Plan Your Trip

Itineraries



5
WEEKS

Guatemala, Mexico, Belize, Honduras & El Salvador

This route takes in many of the northern region's natural and cultural highlights, including Maya ruins, markets, caving and jungle exploration. Go just before or after peak season (December to April) to miss most of the crowds and tropical storms.

Start from **Guatemala City**. Head straight to colonial **Antigua** for a few days, doing a volcano climb and perhaps a crash course in Spanish. Then get a chicken bus to other highland sites; at stunning **Lago de Atitlán** skip the touristy bustle

of Panajachel for a few days of hiking and swimming in the beautiful lake village and New Age magnet **San Marcos La Laguna**, before moving on to **Chichicastenango** to see the famous Maya market.

Pad your budget and venture north to Mexico on a Chiapas loop. Explore the colonial city of **San Cristóbal de Las Casas** and nearby Maya villages, stopping to explore the Maya ruins of **Palenque** set in jungle haunted by the screech of howler monkeys. Back in Guatemala, visit the riverside ruins of **Yaxchilán** en route to the mother of all Maya sites, **Tikal**, best soaked up with an overnight stay. Bus east





Chichicastenango market (p138), Guatemala

to Belize, stopping to go river tubing or caving outside hilly **San Ignacio**, before splashing into the Caribbean's wonderful reefs at laid-back **Caye Caulker**.

Cay-hop south, stopping at offbeat **Hopkins** or more mainstream **Placencia**, before boating to Guatemala's **Livingston** to take a serious jungle boat trip along the Río Dulce. Cross into Honduras and head for the cobblestone town of **Copán Ruinas**, which offers river-tubing trips, horseback rides over mountains, and the namesake ruins. After Copán, detour via La Ceiba to the region's star diving destination – the **Bay Islands**. Utila offers the

chance to spot enormous whale sharks suspended in the silent waters of the big blue. When you're chilled to the max, head back to Copán and continue your journey through Honduras on a bus to **Gracias**, and thank the colonial town for its proximity to Parque Nacional Celaque and its gorgeous long-tailed resplendent quetzals.

Southward in El Salvador, stop in kitschy mountain town **La Palma** for adventure hikes that cross rivers on teetering log bridges. Bypass San Salvador for the Pacific 'surf villages' of **La Costa del Bálsamo**. Catch a Guatemala City bus from San Salvador.



3
WEEKSCosta Rica, Panama
& Nicaragua

From volcano climbs to barefoot, sun-soaked beach towns, southern Central America offers equal parts adventure and R&R. Most travelers first target green giant Costa Rica, but neighboring Nicaragua and Panama offer a strong complement with vibrant culture, colonial character and off-the-beaten-path attractions.

Starting in **San José**, take the bus-and-boat trip to the English-speaking Caribbean coast and **Tortuguero**, where you can wander the boardwalk Afro-Caribbean village and paddle a maze of lush canals in search of manatees and poison-dart frogs.

Bus south into Panama and boat out to the Caribbean archipelago of **Bocas del Toro** for snorkeling and island-hopping, sugar-sand beaches and turquoise waters. When you've achieved total relaxation, dust off your best duds to hit Central America's cosmopolitan capital, **Panama City**, where you can soak up the funky nightlife, explore the cool colonial area of Casco Viejo and admire the expansion of the **Panama Canal**.

Head west, via David, to the cool cloud forests around **Boquete** for adventure. Whitewater raft, tour coffee farms and slog up **Volcán Barú** to earn gaping 360-degree views of both the Pacific and Caribbean. Bus back to Costa Rica, taking the ferry from Puntarenas to check out the boho beach hangout of **Montezuma**, the ideal base to explore the area. Head further off-track to Península de Nicoya's swimming holes, wilderness beaches and the wicked waves of **Mal País**.

Bus to Liberia and continue north to Nicaragua. Sip rum, test the surf and swing in a hammock in kicked-back **San Juan del Sur**, where you can plot your next adventure on **Isla de Ometepe**, a volcano island in a sea-sized lake with hikes that take you to the clouds and beyond. Follow up with a trip to colonial **Gra-nada**, with more volcanoes on tap, this time with eerie night hiking. End your journey by motoring to Managua to grab a direct bus back to San José.



CHRISTIANHEB / GETTY IMAGES ©

ROY TOFT / GETTY IMAGES ©

Top: Volcán Barú (p677), Panama
Bottom: Strawberry poison dart frog,
Tortuguero (p557), Costa Rica

2
WEEKS

Pacific Coast: El Salvador to Panama

PLAN YOUR TRIP ITINERARIES

This sinuous coastline has something to suit everyone, from beach-lovers to surfing pros and dedicated first-time boarders. Hit the monster curls and long-breaking lefts, or simply wend your way from one beach town to the next searching for the ultimate spot in the sun.

Arrive in San Salvador and beam to the nearby **La Costa del Bálsamo**, El Salvador's surf mecca and home to world-class breaks just off La Libertad. Playas El Zonte and Sunzal offer reasonable seaside digs and lessons for budding boarders. Then cross the Nicaragua border to Managua and catch a shuttle to **San Juan del Sur**, a hip international scene ringed by beaches catering to both high-end surf campers and bare-bones backpackers.

Continue south to Liberia, where you'll veer to the famed tip of the Península de Nicoya. Chill out under palm trees, work on your yoga wheel and if you're here for the surfing, take on the raved-about waves of **Mal País** and **Santa Teresa**. Take a shortcut to the mainland with a ferry to Puntarenas. Hardcore surfers should keep heading south to meet the wicked waves of **Dominical**. Otherwise, you can bus to Panama, where you will find a scene that's more up-and-coming than prime time. Veer off the Interamericana at Santiago; from here a couple of small coaster buses will get you to **Santa Catalina** in Panama, a highlight for surfers that is reverently compared with Hawaii.

If you still have time, hit the mellow **Playa Venao** on the Península de Azuero, a rural region renowned for the wild, street-stomping festivals in colonial villages. From Las Tablas, grab a bus to **Panama City** or head north to David to take a long-haul bus back to San Salvador.

Need a break from the tubes? Add a few days to your trip and bolt to the highlands slightly east of the coast, with places like El Salvador's **Ruta de los Flores**, Costa Rica's **Monteverde** and Panama's **Boquete** offering cooler mountain air, coffee farms and hiking trails.

Plan dates to coincide with surf season to feel the full vibe of this trail. In El Salvador and Nicaragua, peak time is March to December, while further south it's February to March. Beginners should visit when the surf isn't at its peak.

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REBECCA MARINI / GETTY IMAGES ©



Top: San Juan del Sur (p476), Nicaragua
Bottom: Boquete (p672), Panama



Central America: Off the Beaten Track

CHAPÍN ABAJO

On the little-visited southwest shores of Guatemala's largest lake, the community tourism project of this tiny village takes visitors to the nearby Bocas del Polochic wildlife reserve by boat. (p182)

LA CAMPA

Visit artisan workshops in this scenic village famed for its black and white Lencan pottery, near Gracias. (p392)

PERQUÍN

Cool mountain air, rugged hiking trails and real war stories await those who make the effort to reach this ex-guerrilla stronghold near the border in El Salvador. (p334)

MEANGUERA DE GOLFO

This formerly disputed archipelago near Nicaragua has long been devoid of tourism but the sailboats are starting to circle and the adventurous want in. Reach it via La Unión. (p333)

PARQUE NACIONAL COIBA

With extraordinary marine wildlife, Panama's newest Unesco World Heritage Site was once its most infamous island prison. Far-flung yet pristine, it offers excellent diving and wildlife-watching. (p667)



PUNTA ALLEN

Prepare yourself. It's a four-hour, transmission-grinding road trip to this fishing settlement south of Tulum, but all is forgiven with the utter tranquility of your own bungalow on the beach. (p68)

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. (p251)

PEARL KEYS

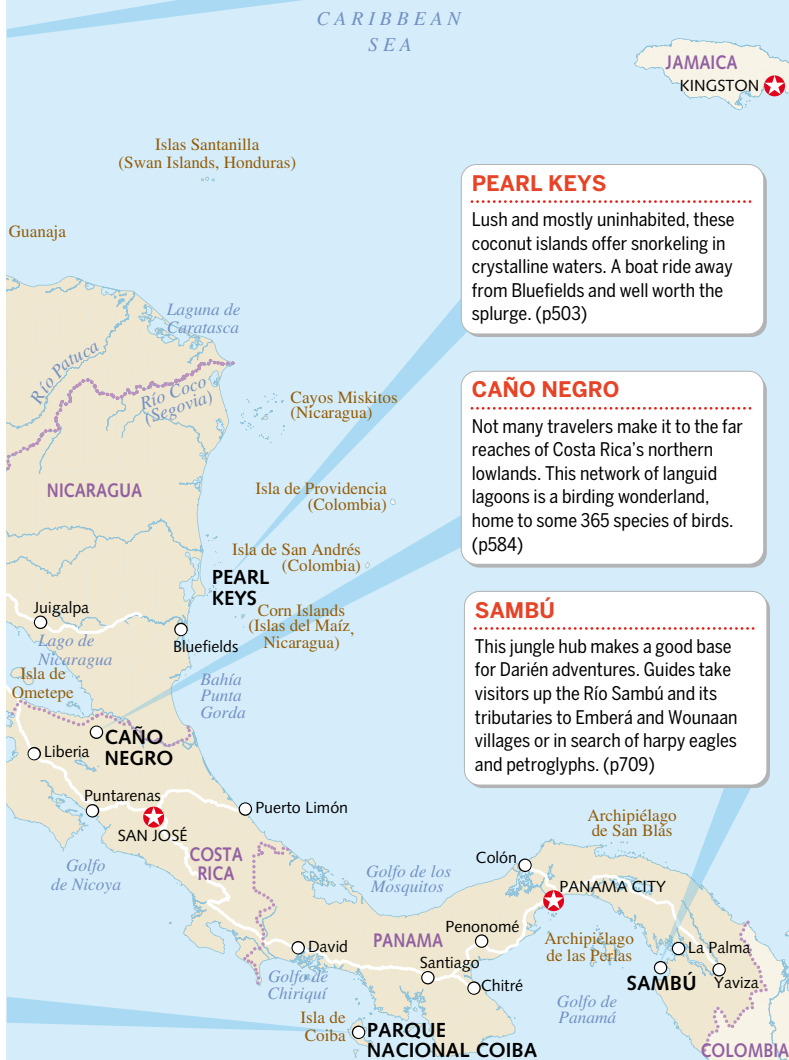
Lush and mostly uninhabited, these coconut islands offer snorkeling in crystalline waters. A boat ride away from Bluefields and well worth the splurge. (p503)

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. (p584)

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. (p709)



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