



# Central America on a shoestring



THIS EDITION WRITTEN AND RESEARCHED BY

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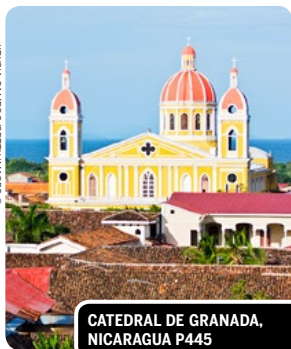
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# Itineraries



2  
WEEKS

## Northern Loop: Guatemala, Mexico & Belize

In depth on culture and coastline, this route loops through much 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 to **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 **Hopkins**. From **Punta Gorda**, catch a *lancha* (small motorboat) to **Livingston**, starting point for a serious jungle cruise up the Río Dulce. From there hop a frequent bus back to Guatemala City.



Above:  
Chichicastenango  
market (p144),  
Guatemala

Right: Palenque Ruins  
(p89), Mexico



WITOLD SKRYPYAK/GETTY IMAGES ©



## 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. When you need a break from the waves, 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, where you'll 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 – still worth a day trip. Take a shortcut to the mainland with a ferry to **Puntarenas**. Hardcore surfers should keep heading south to meet the wicked waves of **Dominical**. Alternatively, an inland jaunt to **Monteverde** offers cooler temperatures, canopy tours and the magic of the cloud forest.

Continue east to Panama. If you missed Monteverde, take a detour to **Boquete**, another mountain town with cool air and strong coffee. Otherwise, make your way to **Santa Catalina**, which claims Hawaii-style waves. From Santiago, you can grab a bus to **Panama City** or David for your homeward journey.

4  
WEEKS

## Caribbean Coast: Mexico to Nicaragua

Explore the ‘other side’ of Central America – where Spanish is heard less than English or Kriol, where 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 makes the Caribbean unique.

Fly into **Cancún** and start working your way south. Your first stop is **Tulum**, an impressive Maya ruin set on prime beachfront property. Then 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. Then 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; there are plenty of hammocks to go around afterward. **Hopkins** is also a laid-back Garifuna town with a gorgeous 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. You’ve come pretty much as far as you can go. (There is a border crossing into Nicaragua at **Leimus**, but it’s a pretty serious slog through jungle – on both sides of the line.) It’s time to board the bus to **Tegucigalpa** to travel onwards, leaving behind the fierce and fascinating Caribbean coast.





## The Center of Central America

This route explores the less traveled, less expensive and altogether lesser known countries of central Central America, taking in two coastlines and a wealth of 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. Stop in **San Salvador** to sample the country's best nightlife. Then continue east to **Playa El Cuco** for a cool and quirky (and eco-conscious) stay at La Tortuga Verde. Turn north and cross into Honduras, heading toward **Lago de Yojoa** to search for a quetzal in the cloud forest. Continue north to **La Ceiba**, 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 silent waters of the big blue.

It's time to head back to Guatemala, but not before stopping in the cobblestone town of **Copán Ruinas**, which offers river-tubing trips, horseback rides over mountains, and its namesake ruins.



## 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**, journey to the hippie-haven **Puerto Viejo de Talamanca** for good food, great surf and rainforest rich in wildlife. Cross the Panamanian border and hop on a boat to the sugar-sand beaches of **Bocas del Toro**. After a few days in paradise, turn south to the cool cloud forests around **Boquete**, where you can slog up **Volcán Barú** for 360-degree views, including both coasts.

Back in Costa Rica, 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 kicked-back **San Juan del Sur**. Rest up for your next adventure on **Isla de Ometepe**, a volcano island in a sea-sized lake. Follow up with a trip to admire the colonial architecture in **Granada**, then on to Managua to grab a direct bus back to San José.

MARCO SIMONI/GETTY IMAGES ©



Above: Parque  
Nacional Manuel  
Antonio (p593), Costa  
Rica

Right: San Juan del Sur  
(p464), Nicaragua

MARIE POLITZER/GETTY IMAGES ©





## 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 Progreso. These sands of solitude are a welcome sight in a region where tourist centers abound. (p72)

### TOLEDO DISTRICT

The deep south of Belize is home to remote Maya villages, crumbling ruins and little-visited national parks and reserves. (p279)

### LAGUNITA CREEK

Kayak and swim your way through the turquoise waterways surrounding this remote ecotourism project set in a seriously-hard-to-get-to corner of Guatemala. (p186)

### 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. (p333)

### 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. (p653)



## 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. (p254)

## 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. (p400)

## PEARL KEYS

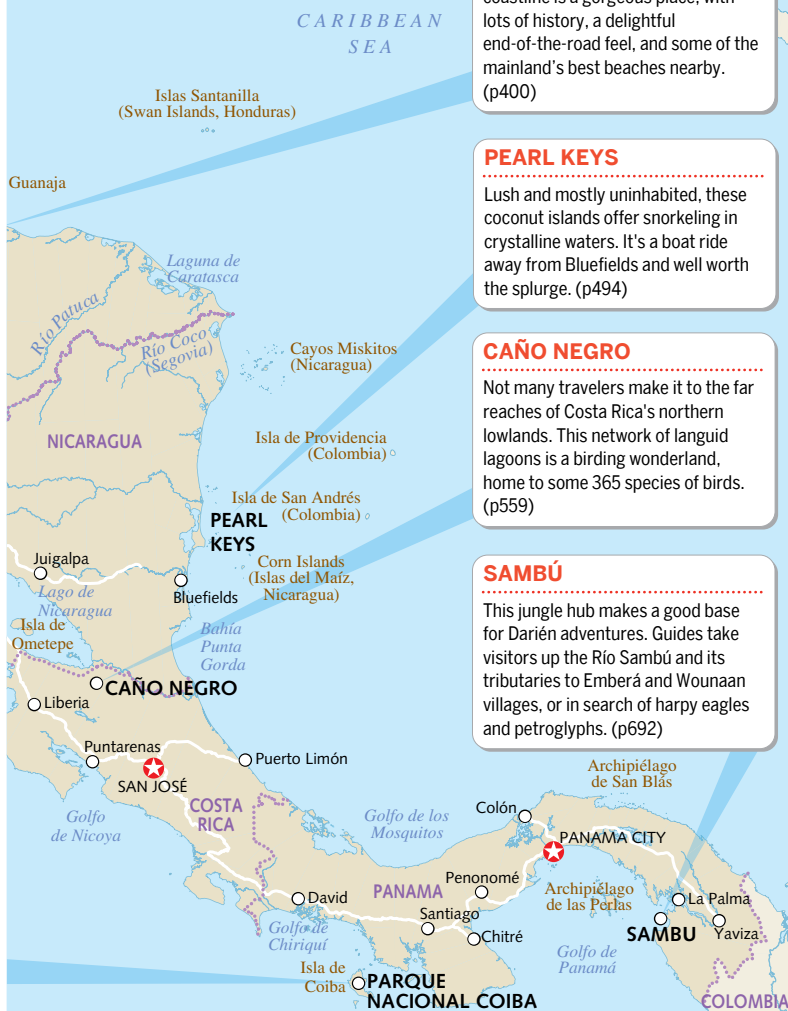
Lush and mostly uninhabited, these coconut islands offer snorkeling in crystalline waters. It's a boat ride away from Bluefields and well worth the splurge. (p494)

## 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. (p559)

## 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. (p692)



# Map Legend

## Sights

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

## Activities, Courses & Tours

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

## Sleeping

- Sleeping
- Camping

## 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

**Honduras** Tom is a London-raised, Berlin-based travel writer who has written about Latin America for almost a decade. Since first visiting Honduras in 2008, Tom has been all over the region, most recently across Northern Mexico and throughout Venezuela for Lonely Planet. Returning for this guide, Tom was really impressed by the passion of both the locals and foreigners working to rebuild Honduran tourism. You can read more of his work at [www.tommasters.net](http://www.tommasters.net)



### Tom Spurling

**El Salvador** Tom has worked on 11 LP titles, including *India*, *Turkey*, *Queensland*, *Japan* and *South Africa*. This is his third time on *Central America*, but the first accompanied by a full-time bongo player. When not cooking dinner in the side of an active volcano, Tom lives in Hong Kong, often in a massage chair. He is married to a very tolerant Western Australian, and they have two children, both of whom are named after plants. He thinks you should go to El Salvador, too.



### Lucas Vidgen

**Guatemala** Born and raised in Melbourne, Australia, Lucas has been traveling and working in Latin America for nearly 20 years. He ended up living in Quetzaltenango for over a decade, having gone there for a few weeks to study Spanish. He currently divides his time between Melbourne and Quetzaltenango where he publishes – and very occasionally contributes to – the city's leading Nightlife and Culture magazine, *XelaWho*. Lucas has contributed to a range of Lonely Planet titles over the years, mostly in Central and South America. His Spanish is OK but he still can't

decide if a pupusa is better than a potato cake.



### Mara Vorhees

**Costa Rica**, **Plan**, **Understand and Survival Guide** chapters In 23 years of travel to Central America, Mara has spotted 182 species of birds, all four New World monkeys, anteaters, sloths and tapirs, plus one jaguarundi. But the wildest animals she knows are her six-year-old twins, who often accompany her. Mara has contributed to many Lonely Planet titles, including *Costa Rica* and *Belize*. When not spying on sloths, she lives in a pink house in Somerville, Massachusetts, with

her husband, two kiddies and two kitties. Follow her adventures at [havetwinswilltravel.com](http://havetwinswilltravel.com).



## 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 Dublin, Franklin, London, Melbourne, Oakland, 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



### Steve Fallon

**Panama** Born in the USA, Steve traveled to Latin America as a youngster. Somehow the middle bit, especially Panama, remained terra incognita to him beyond hats and a canal until LP sent him packing. And what discoveries he made: hummingbirds' nests, cobalt blue- and scarlet-colored frogs, a spider that spins a golden web. Then there was the coffee, the chocolate, the orchids, the beaches, the corals... He's said it once and he'll say it again: Panama, who knew?



### Bridget Gleeson

**Nicaragua** Based in Buenos Aires, Bridget is a travel writer and occasional photographer. Her first experiences in Latin America were in Nicaragua. She lived, worked, and learned to speak Spanish in Granada before moving on to South America; this assignment was a welcome opportunity to return to the place where the great adventure started.



### Paul Harding

**Belize** As a writer, photographer and person with chronic itchy feet, Paul has traveled a good part of the world in the past two decades, usually in search of adventure, islands and beaches. Belize ticks all the boxes: Caribbean coast and cays on one side, remote jungle on the other. On this research trip, Paul river-tubed through caves, zip-lined over jungle canopies, explored Maya ruins, snorkeled on the reef, sampled hot sauces and inspected many *cabañas*. He has

contributed to more than 50 Lonely Planet guides to countries as diverse as Australia, Iceland, Vanuatu and India.



### John Hecht

**Mexico's Yucatán & Chiapas** John has spent more than 20 years living in Mexico, during which time he has contributed to numerous editions of the Lonely Planet *Mexico* book. He was coordinating author on the previous edition of LP's *Cancún*, *Cuzumel & the Yucatán* and he produced a series of short videos shot in the Yucatán region for Lonely Planet TV. He lives in Mexico City with his Mexican wife. Mom's still waiting for him to return to the good ole' USA.

OVER MORE  
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