

The Best of Nicaragua & El Salvador

Nicaragua and El Salvador are still being discovered. Intrepid visitors are retracing the steps of conquistadors and pirates, except this time the loot comes in the form of golden sunsets, silver beaches, and skilled handicrafts. Decide what you are looking for because Nicaragua and El Salvador have it all—bustling cities and isolated villages, luxury hotels and rustic eco-lodges, dense rainforest and wide open beaches. You can swing from a hammock or zip over a forest, sail around islands or surf down a volcano. Below are some of my favorite discoveries, just to get you started.

1 THE MOST UNFORGETTABLE TRAVEL EXPERIENCES

- **Diving in the Corn Islands** (Nicaragua): Spotted tiger rays, blacktip sharks, stingrays, spider crabs, parrot fish, angel fish, barracuda, and triggerfish; they are all out there in the pristine waters waiting for you to drop in and say hello. The Corn Islands have all the glorious turquoise waters and coral reefs you associate with the Caribbean, but without the crowds. Better still, you don't need an oxygen tank on your back, as the luminous, shallow bays are perfect for snorkeling. See chapter 11.
- **Exploring Isla de Ometepe** (Nicaragua): Catch the boat across to the serene twin peaks of the Concepción and Maderas volcanoes that rise out of Lago de Nicaragua, forming a muddy jungle island. Fireflies dance beneath banana trees as people on old buses, bikes, horses, and even oxen negotiate the rutted roads and countless trails. Rocks carved into zoomorphic figures and pre-Columbian petroglyphs dot the landscape of tropical forest and patchwork fields. Volcán Concepción is still very much alive, hurling rocks and spewing lava four times in the last century. The island is an idyllic adventure spot, a rural retreat, and a hiker's paradise. See chapter 9.
- **Sailing down the Río San Juan** (Nicaragua): Float down a broad, majestic expanse of fresh water that pours slowly out of Lake Nicaragua towards the Atlantic Ocean 210km (130 miles) away. It passes rainforests and cattle ranches; stilted shacks on the water; and quiet river lodges, treacherous rapids, and a 300-year-old Spanish fort called El Castillo. The shoreline teems with wildlife, especially at the mammoth Indo-Maíz Biological Reserve on the Nicaraguan side. See chapter 10.
- **Touring Coffee Farms** (Northern Nicaragua): See the “golden grain” processing facilities of historic plantations set amidst the verdant slopes of Matagalpa. Fincas such as Esperanza Verde and Selva Negra have some lovely trails to hike and wildlife to spy upon as well as some excellent accommodations. See chapter 12.
- **Exploring the Winding Mountain Roads and Villages of the Ruta de las Flores** (El Salvador): If you're tight on

time, this 35km (22-mile) route is an excellent sampling of what El Salvador has to offer. The route is known primarily for its small towns, each offering something different, from the furniture craftsmen of Nahuizalco, to Juayua's weekend food and craft festival, to the artsy vibe and cool restaurants of Ataco. The route also offers amazing views of thousands of flowering coffee plants and one of the country's highest and longest zip-line canopy tours. See chapter 19.

- **Seeing Suchitoto** (El Salvador): This is one of El Salvador's most beautiful and unique towns and is well worth the easy, 1-hour drive north of San Salvador. After a turbulent history during El Salvador's civil war, Suchitoto has reemerged as one of El Salvador's leading international arts and cultural centers, with the country's most luxurious boutique hotels and a famous international arts festival. But despite its international flair, Suchitoto is still very much a distinctly El Salvadoran town,

close to the historic town of Cinquera, home to a weekend artisans market, and surrounded by amazing mountain views. See chapter 16.

- **Visiting Volcán Masaya** (Masaya, Nicaragua): The Spanish called this volcano the "Gates of Hell," and you can understand why when you see its boulder-spitting craters and glowing red lava fields. Volcán Masaya is easily one of the most accessible and scariest live volcanoes in the region—it's also one of the most exciting to see up close. Also worth a climb or look are Volcán Maderas and Volcán Concepción. See chapter 7.
- **Turtle-Watching in San Juan del Sur** (San Juan del Sur, Nicaragua): After a spot of sun worshiping on Nicaragua's beaches, come out at night and see one of nature's true wonders—massive turtle hatchings on the very beautiful Playa La Flor. The best time to see turtles nesting is August and September. See chapter 9.

2 THE BEST SMALL TOWNS & VILLAGES

- **Catarina**, Nicaragua: The Pueblos Blancos are a string of hilltop villages south of Managua, each specializing in a particular art or craft. Catarina has a spectacular lookout point on the rim of Laguna de Apoyo Crater Lake, with Granada and Masaya at your feet and the twin peaks of Ometepe Island in the distance on Lago de Nicaragua. The town itself is famous for its carved, wooden furniture, bamboo products, basket making, and lush, tropical nurseries. See chapter 7.
- **Alegría**, El Salvador: This lush garden town is surrounded by misty green hills 1,200m (3,937 ft.) above sea level. High up in coffee country, it offers some of the best views in the nation, as

well as great hiking trails and a friendly, vibrant community. See chapter 17.

- **Perquín & Mozote**, El Salvador: Exploring the history and tragedy of the towns of Perquín and Mozote should provide unique insight into the troubled history of this complex nation. Perquín is a small town tucked into the high eastern mountains, which formed the base of the people's FMLN organization during the civil war. The nearby village of Mozote was the site of one of Latin America's worst modern wartime atrocities; the square and church now feature the well-known Mozote memorial and the names of the townspeople who were killed. See chapter 17.

- **Ataco**, El Salvador: Whimsical murals set the tone for a town that boasts an artistic style and vibe you won't find elsewhere in the country. Ataco is an unmissable stop while exploring the hilltop villages of the Ruta de las Flores in western El Salvador. See chapter 19.
- **San Juan del Sur**, Nicaragua: This small, colorful fishing village of clapboard houses is slowly morphing into a party town with excellent hotels and restaurants. It sits amid a string of great beaches offering surfing, fishing, sailing, or just glorious idling. See chapter 9.

3 THE BEST BEACHES

- **Playa Madera**, Nicaragua: A lovely, dark beach with big waves and some good snorkeling opportunities is 30 minutes north of the seaside town of San Juan del Sur. Popular with surfers and sunset watchers alike, this breezy stretch of sand has some excellent accommodations close by. See chapter 9.
- **Barra de Santiago**, El Salvador: Santiago is a protected reserve and largely undeveloped fishing village along the country's far western coast. The best thing about the place is its isolation and natural beauty; it's surrounded by wide, nearly deserted, sandy beaches and mangrove-filled estuaries where majestic white egrets glide low over the water. And the entire place sits immediately in front of a miles-long line of volcanoes that seem to rise from the palm tree-lined estuary shores. You can fish, swim, surf, paddle, spot sea turtles laying their eggs, or just do nothing and enjoy the view. See chapter 18.
- **Picnic Beach**, Nicaragua: This is the perfect beach: a long white strand lapped by gentle turquoise waters on the unspoiled Caribbean Corn Islands. See chapter 11.
- **Playa El Espino**, El Salvador: A wide, gorgeous beach that is splendidly isolated on weekdays and alive with beachgoers on weekends, Playa El Espino is gaining a reputation as one of El Salvador's best places to throw down a towel and enjoy the sun, sea, and sand. See chapter 18.
- **Playa Maculis**, El Salvador: This is one of El Salvador's hidden gems: a very private 1.5km-long (1 mile) crescent-shaped beach that is dotted with a few houses and a lot of trees. At either end, two rocky points jut out into the sea. This protects the waters from the lateral current that can be so dangerous on the El Salvadoran coast. See chapter 18.

4 THE BEST OUTDOOR ADVENTURES

- **Surfing down a Volcano** (Nicaragua): Hurling down the side of a black volcano at 64kmph (40 mph) on a wooden board brings a whole new perspective to surfing in Nicaragua. The volcano is Cerro Negro, just outside León in the dusty lowlands northwest of the capital. See chapter 13.
- **Trekking in the Parque Nacional Los Volcanes** (El Salvador): Climb the "Lighthouse of the Pacific," a nearly perfect cone known as Volcán de Izalco. It is the park's most visually dramatic volcano and challenging climb, requiring a nearly 3-hour scramble up a steep, rocky, and barren moonscape to the

1,952m (6,404-ft.) summit. Izaco is also one of Central America's youngest volcanoes—it formed in 1770 and erupted almost continuously until 1966. See chapter 20.

- **Canopy Tours Mombacho** (Granada, Nicaragua): A spectacular 17-platform canopy system at Hacienda Cutirre on the eastern face of the Mombacho volcano was actually designed by the inventor of the sport, which means you're in for a heart-stopping ride. See chapter 8.
- **Zip Lining over a Coffee Farm** (El Salvador): Zip on steel cables hundreds of feet off the ground, over lush forests and coffee plantations near the town of Apaneca on the Ruta de las Flores circuit in El Salvador. Thousands of white coffee flowers cover the fields below, and you can see all the way to Guatemala's active Volcán Pacaya. Conclude the adventure with a steaming cup of locally grown brew. See chapter 19.
- **Hiking & Swimming in Parque Nacional El Imposible** (El Salvador): Parque El Imposible is one of El Salvador's largest, most lush, and richest-in-wildlife national parks, and it's dotted with streams, waterfalls, and natural swimming holes that are perfect for swimming. Tacuba, the small town just outside the park, serves as a great base camp for hiking trips. See chapter 19.
- **Bird-Watching in the Bahía de Jiquilisco** (El Salvador): In between Isla de Montecristo and the beaches to its east is the huge island Bahía de Jiquilisco. Its largely undeveloped inlet offers untouched natural beauty, with dozens of mangrove-lined channels to paddle, islands to explore, great views, and beautiful ocean and bay beaches. The bay is also a major stop for 87 types of migratory birds and a nesting ground for sea turtles. It remains one of El Salvador's most untouched and naturally beautiful areas. See chapter 18.
- **Kayaking Around Isla Juan Venado** (Nicaragua): Pelicans and herons step over crocodiles, iguanas, and caimans as you paddle through a labyrinth of channels and waterways in this protected mangrove swamp on the Pacific coast close to León. See chapter 13.
- **Hiking Through Miraflores Nature Reserve** (Nicaragua): Miraflores is a slice of Eden in the northern highlands of Nicaragua. Orchids bloom amid begonias and moss-draped oak trees, while toucans and parakeets hide among the foliage. Hike La Chorrera trail as far as a 60m-high (197-ft.) waterfall, going past ancient caves and prehistoric mounds. See chapter 12.
- **Surfing the Balsamo Coast** (El Salvador): Bodsurfers bob in the water waiting for their turn to ride the waves. The Balsamo Coast is a stretch of bays and inlets famous for its surf. Tourists and El Salvadorans alike flock here on weekends to enjoy the waves, black-sand beaches, laid-back vibe, tasty seafood restaurants, and new and unique hotels. See chapter 18.

5 THE MOST INTRIGUING HISTORICAL SITES

- **Coyotepe Fort** (Masaya, Nicaragua): Whitewashed battlements and squat, yellow-domed towers overlook Masaya town and lake and afford a pleasant visit that belies this structure's dark history of revolution and resistance. See p. 95.
- **Archipiélago Zapatera** (Lake Nicaragua): Famous for its pre-Columbian stone carvings, this archipelago off the

coast of Granada boasts lots of wildlife, a crater lake, and more than 20 archaeological sites that date back as far as 500 B.C. The vast range of zoomorphic statues reveals that the islands were once important religious sites. Isla el Muerto in particular has some of the most spectacular rock drawings in the country, all laid out on a huge slab of stone measuring 100×25m (328×82 ft.) on the island's summit. See p. 124.

- **Joya de Cerén** (outside of San Salvador, El Salvador): Joya de Cerén isn't El Salvador's most visually stunning ruin, but it offers one of Central America's most accurate glimpses into the lives of the region's Maya ancestors in the form of the remains of a Maya village, frozen in time 1,400 years ago when the village was buried beneath the ash of a violent volcanic eruption. Still standing and preserved are the local shaman's house, a community sauna, and private sleeping rooms. See p. 257.
- **Huellas de Acahualinca** (Managua, Nicaragua): Six thousand-year-old footprints of men, women, and children beg the question: Were they fleeing a volcanic eruption or just going for a swim? One thing is for sure, the footprints on display here are some of the oldest pieces of evidence of human activity in Central America. This intriguing site can be visited in a northern suburb of Managua. See p. 84.
- **León** (Nicaragua): This cradle of the revolution has been bombed, besieged, and washed away by hurricanes. Every street corner tells a story, and it's highly recommended that you take a city tour of this fascinating university town with its vibrant murals, tiny plazas, and the biggest cathedral in Central America. Nearby is León Viejo, the original, abandoned colonial city at the feet of its destroyer—Volcán Momotombo. See p. 205.
- **El Castillo** (Río San Juan, Nicaragua): The dark-stained stone remains of the Spanish fort are relics of just how important the San Juan River was. Built to deter marauding pirates bent on raiding prosperous Granada, El Castillo had 32 cannons and a well-stocked armory of 11,000 weapons. Cannon balls and old rum bottles add color to the story. See p. 166.
- **Tazumal** (Santa Ana, El Salvador): El Salvador's most visually interesting and fully excavated set of Maya ruins has a temple pyramid, ball court, and other structures considered to be classic examples of Maya architecture. Though it's much smaller than better known ruins in Guatemala or Honduras, Tazumal's exemplary Maya architecture makes it worth the drive. See p. 332.

6 THE BEST MUSEUMS & CHURCHES

- **León Cathedral** (León, Nicaragua): The biggest church in Central America is a must-see when visiting the historical university city of León. The cathedral is home to some masterpieces of Spanish colonial art, and a statue of a black Christ still bears the hack wounds of a pirate's sword. Here you'll find the Tomb of Rubén Darío, guarded by a weeping lion. At the cathedral's center is a beautiful, Spanish-style courtyard known as the Patio de Príncipes. The cathedral's domed roof holds the bell La Libertad that announced to the world the independence of Central America, and its Gothic roof is a terrace of

- lichen-stained cupolas and buttresses with a commanding view of the surrounding city and countryside. See p. 207.
- **Centro de Arte Fundación Ortiz-Gurdián** (León, Nicaragua): This extensive gallery has easily the best art collection in Nicaragua. Two beautifully restored town houses hold a dazzling selection of paintings and sculptures ranging from 16th-century Cuzco School portraits to modern Nicaraguan installations. You'll also find some out-of-place surprises such as works by Rembrandt, Picasso, and Miro. See p. 209.
 - **Granada Cathedral** (Granada, Nicaragua): The luminous, ochre-colored facade of this simple church dominates the skyline of this beautiful colonial city, setting the tone for an enchanting stay in what is undoubtedly Nicaragua's most beautiful town. See p. 108.
 - **Museo de Arte** (San Salvador, El Salvador): This museum of rotating and permanent exhibits offers visitors an insightful, visual glimpse into the character of the country. Exceptionally interesting is the art of the country's civil war period. The museum also features the famous towering stone mosaic "Monument to the Revolution," which depicts a naked man whose outstretched arms are thought to symbolize freedom and liberty. See p. 253.
 - **Museo de la Revolución Salvadoreña** (Perquín, El Salvador): Rocket launchers, large chunks of a downed army helicopter, and the preserved studio of revolutionary Radio Venceremos are just some of the displays that bring to life the tumultuous events of the 1980s in the revolutionary stronghold of Perquín in the northeastern hills of El Salvador. See p. 285.
 - **Antiguo Convento San Francisco** (Granada, Nicaragua): Though the Antiguo Convento San Francisco has a remarkable collection of pre-Columbian statues, it's not the only attraction in this beautiful city. One great way to see all the sites, including the Antiguo Convento, is to take a horse-and-carriage ride through Granada's charming cobbled streets. See p. 108.
 - **El Teatro Nacional de Santa Ana** (Santa Ana, El Salvador): This stately 1910 theater features a grand exterior balcony; an ornate, old-world lobby; and a three-story theater, complete with elaborate molding, sweeping staircases, and ceiling portraits of long-dead artists. It now hosts performances and exhibits year-round. See p. 332.
 - **Museo Nacional de Antropología Dr. David J. Guzman** (San Salvador, El Salvador): The ancient tools, weapons, pottery, and ceramic artifacts on exhibit here offer an intriguing glimpse into the lives of El Salvador's indigenous communities and explain the evolution of agriculture and early trade in the country. See p. 254.
 - **Iglesia El Rosario** (San Salvador, El Salvador): El Rosario's concrete, half-moon, bunkerlike appearance is a bit bizarre and un-churchlike from the outside, but inside visitors are greeted by colored light streaming in from abstract stained glass running up the height of its two curved walls. Abstract metalworks form the altar and run the length of a third wall. This is one of the most visually interesting churches in El Salvador. See p. 255.
 - **Tin Marín Museo de los Niños** (San Salvador, El Salvador): Here kids can fantasize about being a pilot in the cockpit of a Boeing 727 or lose their bearings in a crooked house known as the *Casa de Gravedad* (Gravity House). Little ones can also dress up like doctors in a pretend operating room, put on plays in the theater, or walk inside a huge volcano (complete with lava and smoke). This children's museum is fun for the whole family. See p. 257.

7 THE BEST SMALL & MODERATELY PRICED HOTELS

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THE BEST OF NICARAGUA & EL SALVADOR

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- **Hotel Los Piños** (Zona Rosa, Managua; ☎ 505/2270-0761; www.hotelespinos.com): One of the more tasteful and elegant small hotels in Managua has lots of space, light, and beautiful interiors. Inside are large windows, tall ceilings, dark-wood floors, and lovely art, while outside there is a good-size garden with a generous pool, all just a stone's throw from all the action in the Zona Rosa. See p. 76.
- **Hotel Sábalos** (Río San Juan, Nicaragua; ☎ 505/8894-9377; www.hotel.sabalos.com.ni): Hotel Sábalos has a beautiful location right over the water, with sweeping views of the river. The low wooden structure of varnished wood has a wraparound veranda, and you can literally fish from the balcony or just watch the locals passing in their impossibly flimsy canoes while fishermen throw nets into the water. See p. 168.
- **Casa Canada** (Corn Islands, Nicaragua; ☎ 505/2644-0925; www.casacanada.com): This ocean-side paradise is easily the most beautiful and well-appointed hotel on the Caribbean Corn Islands. A row of cottage-style rooms face a tiled pool and long rock shore of palm trees and small patches of lawn. Rooms are large, with every type of modern amenity, and line a beachfront garden. See p. 180.
- **Casa Iguana** (Little Corn Island, Nicaragua; no phone; www.casaiguana.net): Palm trees line sandy paths, and colorful cabanas sit close to the shoreline at this charming ecoresort. The complex is run in a sustainable manner, with solar- and wind-powered energy, a recycling program, and fruit and vegetables from an on-site garden. Yoga and massage therapies are available, and some fantastic snorkeling reefs are within paddling distance. See p. 183.
- **Los Almendros de San Lorenzo** (Suchitoto, El Salvador; ☎ 503/2335-1200; www.hotelsalvador.com): This six-room Suchitoto hotel is a rare taste of luxury in a rural mountain village. French owner Pascal Lebailly applied his eye for fashion to create an interior design that's magazine-ready, with a gorgeously lit stone pool, glass-enclosed French restaurant, and walls filled with some of El Salvador's best art. You won't find a more romantic or casually elegant hotel in the country. See p. 271.
- **Hotel Los Arcos** (Estelí, Nicaragua ☎ 505/2713-3830; www.familiasunidas.org/introduction.htm): A large mansion-style house just a half-block from the laid-back plaza is the setting for this modern hotel in the rural town of Estelí. The hotel is set amidst arched galleries that overlook a gorgeous garden courtyard with a fountain and palm trees. See p. 193.
- **La Posada Azul** (San Juan del Sur, Nicaragua; ☎ 505/2568-2524; www.laposadaazul.com): This delightful boutique hotel will make you feel like you've stepped into a García Márquez novel—it's old-school charm is that authentic. High ceilings grace neat wooden interiors and an old-world living room, and a veranda runs the length of the house to a lovely flower garden with a fountain and small pool. See p. 137.
- **Santa Leticia Mountain Resort** (Apaneca, El Salvador; ☎ 503/2433-0357; www.hotelsantalecicia.com): This

luxurious hotel is set amidst a 93-hectare (230-acre) coffee plantation. Spacious, colorful rooms open out onto a charming gallery. Two solar-powered pools are center stage, while the cozy restaurant boasts all glass walls and a stone fireplace. You can do a coffee tour of the nearby farm and view the 2,000-year-old stone sculptures that dot the property. See p. 318.

- **Quinta El Carmen Bed & Breakfast** (Ataco, El Salvador; ☎ 503/2243-0304; www.elcarmenestate.com): This low, red-brick villa surrounded by lush gardens has an adjacent coffee farm and a charming restaurant. Large rattan armchairs sit on a tiled patio that leads to well-appointed rooms with white walls and dark wooden rafters. See p. 320.

- **Hotel La Joya del Golfo** (Golfo de Fonseca, El Salvador; ☎ 503/2648-0072; www.hotellajoyadelgolfo.com): A three-story hacienda-style house sits on the shoreline of a gorgeous bay with postcard-picture islands; fishing villages; and dark, volcanic beaches. The rooms are large and well appointed, and each has a private balcony with panoramic views of the lush surroundings. See p. 311.
- **Hotel y Restaurante Tekuaní Kal** (Balsamo Coast, El Salvador; ☎ 503/2389-6388): Maya-inspired cement sculptures are scattered around this gardenlike property which includes a small infinity pool and waterfall and overlooks the beach. See p. 296.

8 THE BEST LUXURY HOTELS & ECOLOGES

- **Crowne Plaza Hotel Managua** (Barrio Martha Quezada, Managua; ☎ 505/2228-3530; www.ichotelsgroup.com): Managua's most famous hotel is shaped like a giant white pyramid. You'll find luxurious rooms with lots of light, color, and spacious bathrooms and one of the best outdoor pools in the city. See p. 78.
- **La Gran Francia** (Granada, Nicaragua; ☎ 505/2552-6000; www.lagranfrancia.com): A beautiful, well-located, colonial mansion has been exquisitely restored, down to the original ironwork faucets that hang over hand-painted washbasins displaying old-fashioned street scenes. A handsome inner gallery with Spanish tiles and a mosaic pool give this hotel an aristocratic, palatial vibe. See p. 116.
- **Palermo Hotel and Resort** (San Juan del Sur, Nicaragua; ☎ 505/8672-0859; www.palermohotelandresort.com): This

five-star resort has manicured lawns, handsome villas, and spacious rooms decked out in hardwood furnishings and local art. The clubhouse is an elegant mix of marble floors, modern sofas, and classical-style tables contrasting with its palm-thatched roof outside. Big windows, all-glass doors, and tall ceilings allow for lots of light. See p. 137.

- **Morgan's Rock Hacienda and Eco Lodge** (San Juan del Sur, Nicaragua; ☎ 505/8670-7676; www.morgansrock.com): A cluster of 15 luxury bungalows is accessed by a 100m (328-ft.) suspension bridge over a tropical gorge. Architecturally stunning and with superb attention to detail, this ecolodge has no phones, Internet, or air-conditioning, but who needs them when you have an exquisite infinity pool and a beautiful, deserted beach? The large property also includes a private nature

reserve, shrimp farm, and sugar-processing plant that produces its own rum. See p. 140.

- **Two Brothers Surf Resort** (Rivas, Nicaragua; ☎ 505/8877-7501; www.twobrotherssurf.com): The cottages here are set in an 11-hectare (28-acre) private estate. The interior design is sumptuous and eclectic with artifacts from around the world, such as Indonesian carved doors and mosaics. Gorgeous Spanish-style floor tiles grace stylish rooms with red curtains and wall arches. See p. 146.
- **Las Olas Beach House** (Balsamo Coast, El Salvador; ☎ 503/2411-7553): If you like the ocean and adventure, Los Olas Beach House along El Salvador's gorgeous Balsamo Coast is for you. This upscale adventure resort is perched atop a rocky cliff rising from the Pacific with unrivaled ocean views, a cliff-side infinity pool, and an excellent restaurant. But what really makes this place special are the English-speaking owners and managers who live the life they sell. They will take you surfing, snorkeling, sea kayaking, and off-road motorcycling, as well as on more sedate hiking and horseback-riding tours. See p. 298.
- **Río Indio Lodge** (Río San Juan, Nicaragua; ☎ 506/2296-0095; www.rioindio lodge.com): This lodge provides the ultimate jungle experience along with all the creature comforts. A suspended walkway links the wooden cottages, and handsome hardwood interiors grace polished ceramic tiles that lead to chunky wooden balconies outside. The hotel offers tour excursions and birding expeditions and is regarded as one of the best jungle lodges in Central America. See p. 168.
- **Hotel Plaza Colón** (Granada, Nicaragua; ☎ 505/2552-8489; www.hotel plazacoln.com): This hotel hits just the right balance between exuding colonial authenticity and matching the modern traveler's expectations. A wide, polished balcony overlooks the boisterous plaza, and exquisite tiled floors lead to a majestic inner balcony that runs around a glorious courtyard and blue mosaic pool. Everything is luxurious and elegant, and the service is prompt and reliable. See p. 116.
- **La Perla** (León, Nicaragua; ☎ 505/2311-3125; www.laperlaleon.com): La Perla sets a new standard for accommodations in Nicaragua, with impeccable rooms and a palatial interior boasting high ceilings, a spectacular central courtyard, and contemporary Nicaraguan art. See p. 214.
- **Suites Las Palmas** (San Salvador; ☎ 503/2250-0800; www.hotelsuites laspalmas.com.sv): This hip city hotel is within walking distance of San Salvador's best restaurants and shops and offers big, modern suites with unusual designs. The pool, Jacuzzi, and sleek Asian-fusion restaurant are all set on the rooftop and feature amazing views, as does the exercise room, which includes a wall of glass overlooking the city. See p. 246.
- **La Cocotera** (Barra de Santiago, El Salvador; ☎ 503/2245-3691; www.lacocoteraresort.com): This is one of the finest ecolodges in all of Central America. La Cocotera offers a rare taste of international style in a remote and beautiful part of the country. This six-room, semi-all-inclusive ecoresort features three modern cabins, each with two huge, luxurious rooms and Asian-inspired bathrooms. The hotel property stretches from the bay to the beach, meaning you have water on both sides. La Cocotera features solar-powered hot water, brown-water recycling, and it even incubates turtle eggs. See p. 303.

- **Santa Lucía Culinary Institute** (Las Colinas, Managua; ☎ 505/2276-2651): Nicaragua's very own celebrity chef, Nelson Porta, runs this excellent restaurant that doubles as a culinary school. Smoked salmon carpaccio, tortilla soup, and lobster cooked in lemon and wine are all served in stylish and modern surroundings. See p. 82.
- **Rotonda Bello Horizonte** (Managua, Nicaragua): Do what the locals do and hang out at this busy roundabout, surrounded by late-night fast food restaurants, *fritangas*, and cheap eateries. Baritone mariachis and wandering troubadours serenade you while you munch on pizza, *vigorón* (yucca and cabbage), or *quesillos* (burritos with cheese). See p. 86.
- **Café Chavalos** (Granada, Nicaragua; ☎ 505/8852-0210): Café Chavalos gets kids off the street and into the kitchen, training them as chefs and waiters. The restaurant is nicely decorated, and the menu includes red snapper, chicken filled with goat cheese, and stuffed peppers. See p. 121.
- **El Pozo** (San Juan del Sur, Nicaragua; ☎ 505/8806-5708): This small, modern bistro, which has a minimalist design with an open kitchen, serves the best martinis in town and is a good stop for a late-night cocktail. The menu includes a refreshing watermelon salad and a delicious tamarind pork chop. See p. 141.
- **Alo Nuestro** (San Salvador, El Salvador; ☎ 503/2223-5116): San Salvador is packed with excellent restaurants offering cuisines from around the world. But even in that crowded market, Alo Nuestro stands out for its simply delicious food. The frequently changing menu is a fusion of San Salvador's many ethnic restaurants, with an emphasis on local ingredients. The service is top-notch, and the ambience is formal but comfortable. See p. 249.
- **Mocha Nana Café** (Estelí, Nicaragua; ☎ 505/2713-3164) This simple but elegant café offers the best coffee from the northern highlands. Handsome wooden seats and dark-stained tables with polished wood and light-filled decor lead to a little patio out back with simple garden. See p. 194.
- **El Colibrí** (San Juan del Sur, Nicaragua; ☎ 505/8863-8612): Set within a funky clapboard house with a large veranda overlooking a lovely garden, this enchanting restaurant is a piece of art put together from recycled materials. Mosaic-framed mirrors hang between stained-glass lamps and African face masks, while small colored stones hold down your place mats lest the sea breeze carry them away. The international, mostly organic fare is a work of art, too. See p. 141.
- **La Casita** (Estelí, Nicaragua; ☎ 505/2713-4917): At this part-farmhouse restaurant and part coffeehouse, you can enjoy great local coffee, fresh bread, cheeses, and yogurt in a garden by a beautiful stream with relaxing music in the background. Also on sale are local crafts and herbal medicines. See p. 194.
- **La Perrera Restaurant** (Jinotega, Nicaragua; ☎ 505/8432-7423): The road between Matagalpa and Jinotega is one of the most beautiful rides in Nicaragua. Enjoy the view from this hacienda-style restaurant that sits on the side of the mountain road. The menu includes beef, chicken, and seafood, and between

courses you can wander through the outside patio and up into the garden nursery. See p. 204.

- **Restaurante La Perla** (León, Nicaragua; ☎ 505/2311-3125; www.laperla.leon.com): This restaurant's elegant white facade and tall, enchanting ceilings are enough to give you an appetite for Nicaraguan and international cuisine. Paintings by some of the country's greatest artists hang on the walls, and the large salon is framed by handsome mahogany doors. On the menu are Caesar salad, filet mignon, and fresh crab caught the same day from the nearby Poneloya beach. Finish the evening with a coffee from beans grown by the owners on the side of a volcano or a cocktail in the adjoining Canal Bar. See p. 217.
- **Restaurante Barde La Rioja** (Lago de Coatepeque, El Salvador; ☎ 503/2441-6037): Tasty cream of crab soup and lake fish stuffed with shrimp are just some of the choices at this handsome restaurant on a two-story pier sitting high off the water with great views
- and afternoon breezes overlooking the Hotel Torremolinos' grounds and lake. See p. 338.
- **Señor Tenedor** (San Salvador; ☎ 503/2211-8326): Señor Tenedor is all modern lines and sensual colors. Booths sit beneath sweeping, translucent silk tied with deep red satin. Live violin music accompanies modern Italian cooking and a nice selection of international wines. See p. 251.
- **Café Sunzal** (Balsamo Coast, El Salvador; ☎ 503/2389-6284; www.casade.marhotel.com): This café is part of the upscale, luxury boutique hotel **Casa de Mar**. Tucked against a rock cliff along a dark, narrow shore, the restaurant specializes in creative Asian-Salvadoran fare such as curry shrimp laced with coconut and bacon. See p. 297.
- **Los Patios** (Ruta de las Flores, El Salvador; ☎ 503/2401-8590): This upscale, modern hacienda-style eatery has a mountain-view patio overlooking thousands of coffee beans laid out to dry. See p. 315.

10 THE BEST MARKETS & SHOPS

- **Mercado Nacional de Artesanías** (San Salvador; ☎ 503/2224-0747): Long rows of vendors sell unique hammocks, textiles, ceramics, and decorative crafts from artisans around El Salvador. The quality of the art and crafts is high, and the prices aren't bad in what is the capital's best handicrafts market. See p. 261.
- **Diconte Artisans' Shop** (Ataco, El Salvador): This five-room shop in the town of Ataco along the Ruta de las Flores offers unique whimsical paintings, woodcarvings, and crafts in the surrealistic style of Ataco's two main artists, as well as a room full of colorful textiles made on-site by artisans working five old-style looms. You can also watch the artisans work from the shade of a small garden-side coffee and dessert café here. See p. 319.
- **Mercado Central** (San Salvador, El Salvador): Mercado Central near San Salvador's central plaza is the antimercado. It's a sprawling, seemingly chaotic warren of shouting vendors, blaring horns, and old women in traditional clothes chopping vegetables in the street. Its biggest attraction is that it's *not* an attraction. Instead, it's the place

to visit if you want to see a slice of unfiltered El Salvadoran life. See p. 260.

- **Mercado Viejo** (Masaya, Nicaragua): The Gothic, palm-lined walls of Masaya's block-size Old Market offer an endless array of tempting souvenirs

such as intricate pottery, handsome woodcarvings, sturdy leather ware, and beautiful hand-woven hammocks. They are all made in the surrounding city and hilltop villages known as Pueblos Blancos. See p. 94.