

# The Best of Central America

Whether you're an archaeology buff, an outdoor adventurer, or a partyer in search of a good time, Central America presents so many diverse travel options that it'll make your head spin. There are so many rainforests to hike, volcanic peaks to climb, coral reefs to scuba dive, and there's so much colonial splendor to see, that you can't possibly see and do everything that Central America has to offer in one trip. You can certainly make a good go of it, though. Below are some of our personal favorites to get you started.

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## 1 THE MOST UNFORGETTABLE TRAVEL EXPERIENCES

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- **Snorkeling at Shark-Ray Alley & Hol Chan Marine Reserve** (Northern Cayes and Atolls, Belize): These two very popular sites are threatened with overcrowding but still live up to their billing. Shark-Ray Alley guarantees a close encounter with schools of large sting-rays and nurse sharks. The experience provides a substantial adrenaline rush for all but the most nonchalant and veteran divers. Hol Chan Marine Reserve is an excellent snorkeling spot comprised of a narrow channel cutting through a rich and well-maintained shallow coral reef. See chapter 4.
- **Riding an Inner Tube through the Caves Branch River Cave System** (Cayo District, Belize): Strap on a battery-powered headlamp, climb into the center of an inflated car inner tube, and gently float through a series of limestone caves, your headlamp illuminating the stalactites and the occasional bat. The entire sensation is eerie and claustrophobic at times, but fun nonetheless—especially if you go with a small group on a day when the caves are not crowded. See chapter 4.
- **Watching the Sunrise from the Top of a Pyramid in Tikal** (Guatemala): A visit to Tikal is a remarkable experience on its own, but our favorite way to start a visit here is by catching the sunrise from the top of one of the pyramids. In addition to the ruins and sunrise, the surrounding jungle comes to life with the cries of howler monkeys and the frenzied activity and calls of awakening birds. See chapter 5.
- **Paying Your Respects to Maximón** (Guatemala): A syncretic saint worshiped by Guatemala's Maya and Catholic alike, Maximón is the bad boy of the religious pantheon. Maximón supposedly responds well to gifts, and has very specific tastes, so be sure to bring some rum or a cigar as an offering. Many towns across Guatemala have a carved idol of Maximón, or San Simon, although only a few really keep the practice of his daily worship alive. The towns with the most elaborate Maximón rituals and traditions include Santiago de Atitlán and Zunil. See chapter 5.

- **Touring the Towns & Villages around Lake Atitlán** (Guatemala): While Lake Atitlán is exceedingly beautiful in and of itself, the true charm of the lake is its ability to let you visit a half-dozen or more lakeshore towns via local water-taxi services. The water taxis run regular routes throughout the day, stopping at the villages of Santiago de Atitlán, San Pedro de la Laguna, San Marco, San Antonio Palopó, and more. You can hop on and off the taxis at your whim, and stay as long as you like before heading on to the next place or back home to your hotel. See chapter 5.
- **Exploring the 35km (22 miles) of Winding Mountain Road & Villages of the Rutas de Las Flores** (El Salvador): If you're tight on time, this route offers an excellent sample 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 6.
- **Seeing Suchitoto** (El Salvador): This is one of El Salvador's most beautiful and unique towns and 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 6.
- **Eating a Baleada** (Honduras): The iconic snack food of Honduras, served in street-side stalls and sit-down restaurants all over the country, is a folded wheat tortilla stuffed with refried beans, crumbled *queso blanco* (white cheese), sour cream, and occasionally egg, chicken, beef, avocado, onions, or tomatoes. It's so delicious that, after tasting one, you might never want to leave the country. See chapter 7.
- **Seeing the Still-Smoking Flor de Copán Factory** (Santa Rosa de Copán, Honduras): The Flor de Copán tobacco factory is world-renowned for its production of fine cigars like the Don Melo line. A tour here involves a walk through of the factory's heady drying and deveining rooms and witnessing the country's most skilled rollers working firsthand. Even if you hate smoking, this is a great chance to mingle with real Hondurans, outside the standard tourist industry. See chapter 7.
- **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 8.
- **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 8.
- **Gaping at Arenal Volcano/Soaking in Tabacón Hot Springs** (near La Fortuna, Costa Rica): When the skies are

clear and the lava is flowing, Arenal Volcano offers a thrilling light show accompanied by an earthshaking rumble that defies description. You can even see the show while soaking in a natural hot spring and having a drink at the swim-up bar at **Tabacón Grand Spa Thermal Resort** (p. 608). If the rushing torrent of volcano-heated spring water isn't therapeutic enough, you can get a massage here, as well. See chapter 9.

- **Touring the Osa Peninsula** (Southern Costa Rica): This is Costa Rica's most remote and biologically rich region. **Corcovado National Park**, the largest remaining patch of virgin lowland tropical rainforest in Central America, takes up much of the Osa Peninsula. Jaguars, crocodiles, and scarlet macaws all call this place home. Whether you stay in a luxury nature lodge in **Drake Bay** or outside of **Puerto Jiménez**, or camp in the park itself, you will be surrounded by some of the most lush and most intense jungle this country has to offer. See chapter 9.
- **Hiking Sendero Los Quetzales** (Volcán Barú National Park, Panama): Panama's foremost day hike takes visitors around the northeastern flank of Volcán

Barú and through primary and secondary tropical forest and cloud forest that provides a dazzling array of flora and fauna. The trail's namesake resplendent quetzal lives here, too. The trail is mostly downhill from the Cerro Punta side to Boquete, and this is the recommended direction unless you really crave a workout. What's unique about this trek is that travelers lodging around Cerro Punta can send their luggage to their next hotel in Boquete, and walk there. See chapter 10.

- **Looking for More than 500 Species of Birds along Pipeline Road in Soberanía National Park** (Panama): This is the country's "celebrity" bird-watching trail for the immense number of species found here. In fact, for several years Pipeline Road has set the world record for 24-hour bird counts. Even nonbirders can't help getting caught up in the action with so many colorful show birds fluttering about, such as motmots, trogons, toucans, antbirds, colorful tanagers, and flycatchers. The farther you walk or bike along the rainforest trail, the better your chances are of spotting rare birds. See chapter 10.

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## 2 THE BEST SMALL TOWNS & VILLAGES

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- **Caye Caulker**, Belize: The official slogan here is "Go Slow." Even going slow, you can walk from one end of this small island to the other in under 20 minutes. The fastest moving vehicles, in fact, are bicycles, although lazier souls roam around in golf carts. The town itself is a small and funky Caribbean beach burg, with a lively mix of restaurants, bars, and tour operators to keep you busy and interested. See chapter 4.
- **Flores**, Guatemala: In addition to serving as the gateway to Guatemala's greatest Maya ruin, Tikal, the small island

town of Flores has ample charms of its own. The small island is great for walking, and you'll find plenty of fine restaurants, bars, and small hotels here. In addition, the town is loaded with small boats eager to give you a tour of nearby attractions, or simply a sunset cruise on the lake. See chapter 5.

- **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 6.

- **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 6.
- **Miami**, Honduras: Set on a narrow sandbar between the Caribbean and the Los Micos lagoon in Parque Nacional Jeanette Kawas, this Garifuna village, just a small collection of thatched huts, has remained unchanged for a couple of hundred years. Get there while you can though, as development around Tela Bay is a serious threat to this and other communities nearby. See p. 377.
- **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 8.

- **Tortuguero Village** (on the Caribbean coast, Costa Rica): Tortuguero Village is a small collection of rustic wooden shacks on a narrow spit of land between the Caribbean Sea and a dense maze of jungle canals. It's been called Costa Rica's Venice, but it actually has more in common with the South American Amazon. As you explore the narrow canals here, you'll see a wide variety of herons and other water birds, three types of monkeys, three-toed sloths, and caimans. If you come between June and October, you might be treated to the awe-inspiring spectacle of a green turtle nesting—the small stretch of Tortuguero beach is the last remaining major nesting site of this endangered animal. See chapter 9.
- **Bocas del Toro**, Panama: There are plenty of surfing hot spots along the Pacific Coast of Panama, especially at Santa Catalina, but Bocas is where surfers find everything from beginner-friendly waves to monster, Hawaii-style waves that reach more than 6m (20 ft.). What's special about Bocas, too, is that the water is clear blue, allowing you to see the reef as you race over it, and there are lots of lodging options, restaurants, and thumping nightlife, unlike in Santa Catalina. See chapter 10.

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### 3 THE BEST BEACHES

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- **Placencia**, Belize: This is the hippest little beach town in Belize. In a Caribbean country decidedly lacking in long stretches of beach, Placencia offers nearly 26km (16 miles) of white sand fronting a shimmering turquoise sea. You can wander up and down the

length of this long beach, or hang out near the little creole village, whose main thoroughfare and directional reference point is a narrow strip of concrete running north to south and known simply as "the sidewalk." See chapter 4.

- **Playa los Cóbanos**, El Salvador: Who knew? El Salvador happens to be home to some of Central America's best Pacific diving. Specifically, El Salvador's Playa los Cóbanos features a 161-sq.-km (62-sq.-mile) reef system filled with tropical fish and a half-century-old shipwreck to explore. See chapter 6.
- **West Bay Beach**, Roatán, Honduras: The crystal-clear water and powdery white sand have led many to call this one of the top beaches in the entire Caribbean. Don't forget your snorkel gear; the world's second-largest barrier reef is just offshore. See chapter 7.
- **The Corn Islands**, Nicaragua: You won't lack company while taking a dip and exploring the coral reefs around these classic Caribbean treasure islands: Spider crabs, parrot fish, and baby barracuda among others will dart before your eyes in the pristine blue waters here. See chapter 8.
- **Manuel Antonio**, Costa Rica: The first beach destination to become popular in Costa Rica, Manuel Antonio retains its charms despite burgeoning crowds and mushrooming hotels. The beaches inside the national park are idyllic, and the views from the hills approaching the park are enchanting. This is one of the few remaining habitats for the endangered squirrel monkey. Rooms with views tend to be a bit expensive, but many a satisfied guest will tell you they're worth it. See chapter 9.
- **Playa Montezuma**, Costa Rica: This tiny beach town at the southern tip of the Nicoya Peninsula has weathered fame and infamy, but retains a funky sense of individuality. European backpackers, vegetarian yoga enthusiasts, and UFO seekers choose Montezuma's beach over any other in Costa Rica. The waterfalls are what set it apart from the competition, but the beach stretches for miles, with plenty of isolated spots to plop down your towel or mat. Nearby you can explore the **Cabo Blanco National Park**. See chapter 9.
- **Isla Bastimentos National Park**, Bocas del Toro, Panama: Cayos Zapatillas, or the "Slippers Islands" (so-called because they resemble footprints), not only fulfill the beach lover's fantasy with their soft sand backed by a tangle of jungle; they are also surrounded by a rich display of coral that attracts hordes of fish, providing good snorkeling. The park's main island, Isla Bastimentos, offers terrific beaches with clean sand and blue water, which can be reached by a short walk or hike, or by boat during the calm-water season from August through October. See chapter 10.

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## 4 THE BEST OUTDOOR ADVENTURES

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- **Scuba Diving or Snorkeling on the Belize Barrier Reef** (Belize): Running the entire length of the country's coastline, the Belize Barrier Reef is the second-longest continuous barrier reef in the world. Here you will find some of the best snorkeling opportunities and scuba-diving sites in the world. Whether it's shallow water snorkeling over multi-colored fan and staghorn coral, or scuba diving with whale sharks off of Gladden Spit, the opportunities are nearly endless and almost always amazingly rewarding. See chapter 4.
- **Horseback Riding through the Cayo District** (Belize): The Cayo District is a perfect area to explore on horseback. Rides can be combined with visits to jungle waterfalls and swimming holes, as well as nearby Maya ruins. **Mountain Equestrian Trails** (☎ 669-1124; [www.metbelize.com](http://www.metbelize.com)) has one of the

better stables and horse-riding operations in the Cayo District. See chapter 4.

- **Climbing an Active Volcano** (Guatemala): Guatemala's mountainous terrain is predominantly volcanic, and many of these volcanoes are still active. There's nothing as primal as climbing the flanks of an active volcano or peering down into an erupting crater. Both of these experiences are possible on a climb to the summit of **Pacaya** volcano. Once Pacaya's whetted your appetite, there are numerous other volcanoes here to scale, including **Santa María**, **Tajumulco**, **Agua**, and **Acatenango**. See chapter 5.
- **Mountain Biking Rural Back Roads** (Guatemala): The back roads and dirt paths of rural Guatemala are perfect for fat tire explorations. Whether you choose to take a ridge ride between small villages or a more technically challenging ascent or descent of a volcano, there is something for all ability levels. **Old Town Outfitters** (☎ 502/5399-0440; [www.bikeguatemala.com](http://www.bikeguatemala.com)) is one favorite operator, and has excellent guides and equipment, and a wide range of tours and trips. See chapter 5.
- **Hiking & Swimming in Parque Nacional El Imposible** (El Salvador): Parque 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 6.
- **Trekking through La Mosquitia** (Honduras): Rich with wildlife and home to ethnic groups like the Miskito, Pech, Garífuna, and Tawahkas, Central America's largest tract of rainforest is nothing less than spectacular. Community-based tourism initiatives, run directly in the indigenous villages themselves, can assist in your exploration of the swamps, wetlands, grasslands, lagoons, and beaches here. See chapter 7.
- **Bird-Watching in Honduras**: Trogons, motmots, tanagers, scarlet macaws, boat-billed herons, resplendent quetzals, and toucans are only a small fraction of the avian life you will encounter in places such as Lancetilla, Lago de Yojoa, Pico Bonito, Cerro Azul, and Celaque. Some areas of the country have recorded as many as 400 species. See chapter 7.
- **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 8.
- **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 8.
- **Trying the New Adventure Sport of Canyoning** (Costa Rica): While far from standardized, canyoning usually involves hiking along and through the rivers and creeks of steep mountain canyons, with periodic breaks to rappel down the face of a waterfall, jump off a rock into a jungle pool, or float down a small rapid. **Pure Trek Canyoning** (☎ 2461-2110; [www.puretrekcostarica.com](http://www.puretrekcostarica.com)) in La Fortuna, and **Psycho Tours** (☎ 8353-8619; [www.everydaycostarica.com](http://www.everydaycostarica.com)) near Puerto Jiménez, are two of the prime operators in Costa Rica. See chapter 9.
- **Kayaking around the Golfo Dulce** (Costa Rica): Slipping through the waters of the Golfo Dulce by kayak gets you intimately in touch with the raw

beauty of this underdeveloped region. Spend several days poking around in mangrove swamps, fishing in estuaries, and watching dolphins frolic in the bay. **Escondido Trex** (☎ 2735-5210; [www.escondidotrex.com](http://www.escondidotrex.com)) provides multiday custom kayaking trips out of Puerto Jiménez on the Osa Peninsula. See chapter 9.

- **White-Water Rafting & Kayaking the Chiriquí & Chiriquí Viejo Rivers** (Panama): Depending on which section you raft, these two rivers produce serious white-water ranging from technical Class 3 to Class 5, some portions of which are so difficult they've been named "Fear" and "Get Out If You Can." There are plenty of tamer floats on Class 2 rivers, such as the Esti, for families and

beginners. Virtual solitude, beautiful views, and lush surroundings are part of the tour, too. Contact **Chiriquí River Rafting** (☎ 720-1505; [www.panama-rafting.com](http://www.panama-rafting.com)) in Boquete or, for kayaking, **Panama Rafter**s (☎ 720-2712; [www.panamarafterers.com](http://www.panamarafterers.com)). See chapter 10.

- **Swinging through the Treetops on a Canopy Tour** (Panama and throughout Central America): This unique adventure is becoming quite the rage. In most cases, after a strenuous climb using ascenders, you strap on a harness and zip from treetop to treetop while dangling from a cable. There are canopy tours all around Panama, and throughout Central America for that matter. Check the various destination sections to find a canopy tour operation near you.

## 5 THE MOST INTRIGUING HISTORICAL SITES

- **Caracol** (Belize): Caracol is the largest known Maya archaeological site in Belize, and one of the great Maya city-states of the Classic era. Located deep within the Chiquibil Forest Reserve, the ruins are not nearly as well excavated as Tikal. However, this is part of Caracol's charm. The main pyramid here, Caana or "Sky Palace," stands some 41m (136 ft.) high; it is the tallest Maya building in Belize and still the tallest man-made structure in the country. See p. 134.
- **Tikal** (El Petén, Guatemala): In our opinion, Tikal is the most impressive of all the ancient Maya ceremonial cities. Not only is the site massive and meticulously excavated and restored, it's set in the midst of a lush and lively tropical jungle. The peaks of several temples poke through the dense rainforest canopy, toucans and parrots fly about, and the loudest noise you'll hear is the guttural call of howler monkeys. In its heyday, the city probably covered as many as 65 sq. km (25 sq. miles) and

supported a population of more than 100,000. See p. 178.

- **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. 244.
- **Copán** (Honduras): Often referred to as the Paris of the Maya world, these majestic ruins will take you on a dramatic journey through the Maya civilization. The secret to understanding the Copán Ruins is a large square block of carved stone known as the Altar Q, which represents the dynastic lineage of 16 kings whose rule spanned nearly 4 centuries. See p. 356.

- **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. 448.
- **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. 460.

- **Casco Viejo** (Panama City, Panama): This UNESCO-designated Panama City neighborhood is renowned for its Spanish, Italian, and French-influenced late-18th-century architecture and its narrow streets, bougainvillea-filled plazas, and breezy promenade. But Casco Viejo is also home to some of the country's top historical landmarks, such as La Catedral Metropolitana, the charred remains of the Iglesia de Santo Domingo, Casa Gongora, the best preserved example of a Spanish colonial home, and the UNESCO-designated Salon Bolivar, the site of the famous 1826 congress organized by Bolivar to discuss the unification of Colombia, Mexico, and Central America.

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## 6 THE BEST MUSEUMS & CHURCHES

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- **Iglesia La Merced** (Antigua, Guatemala): In a city awash in Catholic churches, convents, and monasteries, Iglesia La Merced reigns supreme. It's no small coincidence—nor small honor—that the principal procession of the Holy Week celebrations leaves from this church. The ornate baroque facade is painted bright yellow and white, and the interior is full of art and sculptures. The ruins of the attached convent are also worth a visit. See p. 182.
- **Iglesia de Santo Tomás** (Chichicastenango, Guatemala): Dating from 1540, this modest church serves simultaneously as a place for Catholic worship and ancient Maya rituals. The exterior steps, which possess a privileged perch over the town of Chichicastenango, are believed to represent the 18 months of the Maya calendar. Today, these steps are constantly in use as an altar for Maya prayer and offerings. It was in the attached convent that the oldest known

version of the Popol Vuh was discovered. See p. 207.

- **Museo de Arte** (San Salvador, El Salvador): This 2,267-sq.-m (24,400-sq.-ft.), six-room museum of rotating and permanent exhibits offers the visitor an insightful, visual glimpse into the character of the country. Exceptionally interesting is the art of the country's civil war period. Museo de Arte de El Salvador 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. 241.
- **Chiminike** (Tegucigalpa, Honduras): This modish children's museum in the country's capital isn't shy about making sure kids are entertained: a human body room complete with fart sounds, a crawl through an intestinal tract, and a graffiti prone VW Beetle are all on exhibit. Kids might not realize it, but



every quirk is part of the museum's ingenious way to get young people to learn. See p. 334.

- **Antiguo Convento San Francisco** (Granada, Nicaragua): Though the Antiguo Convento San Francisco has a remarkable collection of pre-Colombian 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. 477.
- **Museo Nacional de Costa Rica** (San José, Costa Rica): In addition to housing a comprehensive collection of historical and archaeological artifacts, Costa Rica's National Museum occupies a former army barracks that was the

scene of fighting during the civil war of 1948. The exterior of the building still shows the pockmarks from bullets used in the street battles of the country's last civil war. See p. 555.

- **Miraflores Visitors Center** (Canal Zone, Panama): This top-notch museum is the best land-based platform from which to see the Panama Canal at work. The four-floor museum features an interactive display, a theater, and exhibits providing information about the canal's history and its impact on world trade. Helpful information is provided in English and Spanish, and the museum is well organized and maintained. Best of all are the excellent views of gigantic cargo ships transiting the canal. See p. 673.

## 7 THE BEST SMALL & MODERATELY PRICED HOTELS

- **San Pedro Holiday Hotel** (Ambergris Caye, Belize; ☎ 501/226-2014; www.sanpedroholiday.com): This brilliantly white three-building complex with painted purple and pink trim sits in the center of San Pedro town. This was the first hotel on Ambergris Caye when Celi McCorkle opened it over 40 years ago, and it's still one of the best. Grab a room with an oceanview balcony and you'll be in tropical vacation heaven. See p. 116.
- **Tree Tops Guest House** (Caye Caulker, Belize; ☎ 501/226-0240; www.treetopsbelize.com): While the best rooms here actually fall into the moderately priced category (and are some of the best rooms on Caye Caulker), the whole place offers such good value for your money that it's getting a listing here. See p. 128.
- **La Casa del Mundo** (Jaibalito, Lake Atitlán, Guatemala; ☎ 502/5218-5332; www.lacasadelmundo.com): Set

atop an isolated rocky outcropping jutting into Lake Atitlán, this hotel offers a few rooms with shared bathrooms that are a real steal (even the ones with private bathrooms are a bargain), with stupendous views of the lake. A lakeside fire-heated Jacuzzi and several open-air terraces make this place really special. See p. 198.

- **Casa Mañen** (Quetzaltenango, Guatemala; ☎ 502/7765-0786; www.comeseeit.com): This is my favorite hotel in Quetzaltenango. The rooms are all decorated with a range of local arts and craft works, the service is excellent, and the owners are very knowledgeable about the various local tour options. The large rooftop terrace offers wonderful panoramic views of the city. See p. 205.
- **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. It's owned by former Paris fashion convention organizer Pascal Lebailly, who spent 17 months with 30 workers transforming a 200-year-old house into an oasis of style. He 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. 285.

- **The Lodge at Pico Bonito** (La Ceiba, Honduras; ☎ 888/428-0221; www.picobonito.com): While you can tour the wonderful Parque Nacional Pico Bonito near La Ceiba in a number of ways, few would argue that one of the best is by staying at luxurious Pico Bonito Lodge. This property has its own set of trails, a butterfly farm, a resort-style pool, spa facilities, and a gourmet restaurant, in addition to great rooms. Guided hikes bring you through former cacao fields, across several levels of tropical forest, and to swimming holes and waterfalls that are ideal for taking soaks in. See p. 389.
- **La Posada Azul** (San Juan del Sur, Nicaragua; ☎ 505/568-2524; 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. 498.
- **Hotel Grano de Oro** (San José, Costa Rica; ☎ 2255-3322; www.hotelgrano.deoro.com): San José boasts dozens of old homes that have been converted into hotels, but few offer the plush accommodations or professional service found at the Grano de Oro. All the guest rooms have attractive hardwood furniture, including old-fashioned wardrobes in some rooms. When it's time to relax, you can soak in a hot tub or have a drink in the rooftop lounge while taking in San José's commanding view. See p. 562.
- **Amor de Mar** (Montezuma, Costa Rica; ☎/fax 2642-0262; www.amordemar.com): Clean, spacious, and comfortable rooms set on a sloping lawn that leads down to a rocky coastline, with a natural pool carved into the rocks, all add up to my idea of a tropical paradise. What's more: you get this all at a great price. See p. 590.
- **Arco Iris Lodge** (Monteverde, Costa Rica; ☎ 2645-5067; www.arcoiris.lodge.com): This small lodge is right in Santa Elena, and it's by far the best deal in the Monteverde area. The rooms are cozy and immaculate, and the owners are extremely knowledgeable and helpful. See p. 599.
- **The Coffee Estate Inn** (Boquete, Panama; ☎ 720-2211; www.coffeeestate.inn.com): Gorgeous views of Volcán Barú, cozy bungalows with full kitchens, and owner-managed, friendly service tailored to your needs are the hallmarks of the Coffee Estate Inn. The bungalows are enveloped in native forest, fruit trees, and flowers that attract myriad birds. The romantic ambience is ideal for honeymooners. See p. 689.

## 8 THE BEST LUXURY HOTELS & ECOLODGES

- **Turtle Inn** (Placencia, Belize; ☎ 800/746-3743 in the U.S., or 501/824-4912; www.turtleinn.com): Building on the experience gained from his Blancaneaux Lodge, and constructing upon the ruins of a hotel destroyed by

Hurricane Iris, director Francis Ford Coppola has upped the ante on high-end beach hotels in Belize. The individual villas here are perhaps the most beautiful and luxurious in Belize. The hotel is set right on an excellent stretch of beach, and the service and dining are top-notch. See p. 147.

- **Chaa Creek** (Cayo District, Belize; ☎ 501/824-2037; [www.chaacreek.com](http://www.chaacreek.com)): A pioneer nature lodge in Belize, this collection of individual and duplex cottages was also an innovator in the whole concept of rustic luxury. Cool terra-cotta tile floors, varnished wood, thatched roofs, and beautiful Guatemalan textiles and handicrafts are elegantly yet simply combined. The property is set on a steep hillside over the lovely Macal River. Service is very friendly and personable, and the lodge provides easy access to a wealth of natural adventures and ancient Maya wonders. See p. 137.
- **Mesón Panza Verde** (Antigua, Guatemala; ☎ 502/7832-1745; [www.panzaverde.com](http://www.panzaverde.com)): This elegant and artistic Antigua hotel offers large suites and superb service, and one of the best restaurants in the country. The old building is loaded with artwork and interesting architectural details, and there's a wonderful, mazelike rooftop terrace with panoramic views. See p. 186.
- **Palacio de Doña Leonor** (Antigua, Guatemala; ☎ 502/7832-2281; [www.palaciodeleonor.com](http://www.palaciodeleonor.com)): Although it's located in an old colonial mansion—just off Antigua's main plaza—that once belonged to Pedro de Alvarado's daughter, this hotel also offers up all the modern conveniences you could ask for. The suites have massive flatscreen televisions and Jacuzzis. Yet, the decor and ambience is decidedly colonial and decadent. See p. 186.
- **Hotel Atitlán** (Panajachel, Guatemala; ☎ 502/7762-1441; [www.hotelatitlan.com](http://www.hotelatitlan.com)): This fabulous hotel is set on the shores of Lake Atitlán, with a stunning view of the lake and its surrounding volcanoes. Beautiful rooms, lush gardens, ample amenities, impeccable service, and a great restaurant make this a complete package. See p. 196.
- **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. 302.
- **Hotel Telamar** (Tela, Honduras; ☎ 504/269-4414; [www.hoteltelamar.com](http://www.hoteltelamar.com)): This neighborhood of pastel-colored stilted villas formerly owned by Tela Railroad Company executives is situated on Tela's best beach. They recently added a few posh buildings with hotel-style rooms, a few restaurants, and a 90m-long (300-ft.) pool, transforming it into Tela's first resort. Even the old villas have been remodeled and are being rented out. See p. 378.
- **Hotel Plaza Colon** (Granada, Nicaragua; ☎ 505/552-8489; [www.hotelplazacolon.com](http://www.hotelplazacolon.com)): The Plaza Colon 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. 479.

- **La Perla** (León, Nicaragua; ☎ 505/311-3125; [www.laperlaleon.com](http://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. 467.
- **Four Seasons Resort Costa Rica** (Papagayo Peninsula, Costa Rica; ☎ 800/819-5053 or 2696-0000; [www.fourseasons.com/costarica](http://www.fourseasons.com/costarica)): This was the first major resort to really address the high-end luxury market in Costa Rica. Within its first month of operation, Michael Jordan and Madonna were notable guests. A beautiful setting, wonderful installations, a world-class golf course, and stellar service continue to make this the current king of the hill in the upscale market. See p. 588.
- **Flor Blanca Resort** (Playa Santa Teresa, Costa Rica; ☎ 2640-0232; [www.florblanca.com](http://www.florblanca.com)): The individual villas at this intimate resort are some of the largest and most luxurious in the country. The service and food are outstanding, and the location is breathtaking, spread

over a lushly planted hillside steps away from Playa Santa Teresa. See p. 588.

- **Arenas del Mar** (Manuel Antonio, Costa Rica; ☎/fax 2777-2777; [www.arenasdelmar.com](http://www.arenasdelmar.com)): With large and ample rooms, excellent service and amenities, a beautiful little spa, and arguably the best beach access and location in Manuel Antonio, this hotel has a lot to offer. See p. 618.
- **The Bristol Panama** (Panama City, Panama; ☎ 265-7844): This hotel exudes buttoned-up luxury with its conservative decor, but the ambience at the Bristol somehow manages to feel cozy rather than stuffy. The Bristol is particularly known for its bend-over-backwards service and fine dining at Las Barandas Restaurant. See p. 663.
- **Canopy Tower** (Soberanía National Park, Panama; ☎ 264-5720): Birders flock to this ecolodge for its focus on bird-watching and its location in a habitat that's friendly to a wide range of species. The Canopy Tower, a remodeled military radar station in thick jungle, is a cross between a stylish B&B and a scientific research center. It's just 25 minutes from Panama City but feels worlds away, and the 360-degree observation deck here provides stunning views and a platform with scopes. See p. 679.

## 9 THE BEST LOCAL DINING EXPERIENCES

- **Rojo Lounge** (Ambergris Caye, Belize; ☎ 501/226-4012): The folks at Azul Resort, an isolated little place on Northern Ambergris Caye, serve very creative and well-prepared fusion cuisine, in a relaxed and inviting open-air ambience. The menu features some of the more creative fusion items to be had on the island—no mean feat given the competition—and there are also nightly specials. See p. 120.
- **The French Connection** (Placencia, Belize; ☎ 501/523-3656): This place created an immediate buzz when it first opened in Placencia, and quickly outgrew its first location. At once elegant and relaxed, the food here is a creative take on contemporary bistro fare. See p. 149.
- **Tamarindos** (Guatemala City, Guatemala; ☎ 502/2360-2815): The chef at this trendy Zona Viva restaurant is

wowing Guatemala City with her eclectic fusion cooking. It's easy to overdo or miscalculate when combining ingredients and techniques from various world cuisines, but Tamarindos hits all the right notes. The menu is long, and touches many bases, with culinary influences from Asia, Italy, and many places in between. Be sure to ask about daily specials, as this is where the chef really shines. See p. 175.

- **Kacao** (Guatemala City, Guatemala; ☎ 502/2237-4188 or 2377-4189): This popular restaurant takes Guatemalan cuisine and polishes it up a bit. The cooking is fairly traditional, with signature dishes from around the country, but the service, ambience, and presentation are far more refined than you'll find at almost any other place specializing in Chapin cuisine. Although they do a brisk lunch business, I prefer to come for dinner, when the thatch roof is illuminated by candles and other strategically placed lighting. See p. 175.
- **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 restaurant has been open since 1999 and has built a quiet word-of-mouth following among locals and international travelers. 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. 251.
- **Hacienda San Lucas** (Copán Ruinas, Honduras; ☎ 504/651-4495; [www.haciendasanlucas.com](http://www.haciendasanlucas.com)): On a hillside overlooking the Copán valley, this rustic 100-year-old, family-owned hacienda dishes out an authentic Maya Chortí five-course candlelit dinner focusing on fresh, local ingredients. Their tamales, corn chowder, and fire-roasted chicken with *adobo* sauce do not disappoint. See p. 363.
- **El Colibri** (San Juan del Sur, Nicaragua; ☎ 505/863-8612): Set within a funky colored 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. 500.
- **La Casita** (Estelí, Nicaragua; ☎ 505/713-4917): At this part-farmhouse restaurant and part coffeehouse, you can enjoy great local coffee, fresh bread, cheeses, and yogurts in a garden by a beautiful stream with relaxing music in the background. Also on sale are local crafts and herbal medicines. See p. 534.
- **Grano de Oro Restaurant** (San José, Costa Rica; ☎ 2255-3322): This stylish little hotel has an elegant restaurant serving delicious Continental dishes and decadent desserts. The open-air seating in the lushly planted central courtyard is delightful, especially for lunch. See p. 568.
- **Playa de los Artistas** (Montezuma, Costa Rica; ☎ 2642-0920): This place is the perfect blend of refined cuisine and beachside funkiness. There are only a few tables, so make sure you get here early. Fresh, grilled seafood is served in oversize ceramic bowls and on large wooden slabs lined with banana leaves. See p. 591.
- **La Pecora Nera** (Puerto Viejo, Costa Rica; ☎ 2750-0490): I'm not sure that a tiny surfer town on the remote Caribbean coast of Costa Rica deserves such fine Italian food, but it's got it. Your best bet here is to allow yourself to be

taken on a culinary roller-coaster ride with a mixed feast of the chef's nightly specials and suggestions. See p. 632.

- **Panamonte Inn Restaurant** (Boquete, Panama; ☎ 720-1324): This sanctuary of gourmet cuisine is located within the clapboard walls of the oldest hotel in

Boquete. The food is inventive and consistently good, and service is attentive and courteous. You can bypass their more formal dining area for a comfy seat in their fireside bar and still order off the main menu. See p. 692.

## 10 THE BEST MARKETS & SHOPS

- **Nim Po't** (Antigua, Guatemala): A massive indoor space with a soaring ceiling houses this local craft-and-textile cooperative warehouse. Textiles, woodcarvings, and ceramic wares from across the country are available here. The quality varies greatly, but if you know what to look for, you can find some fine works without having to venture into the farther reaches of rural Guatemala. See p. 185.
- **Chichicastenango's Market** (Chichicastenango, Guatemala): Guatemala's Maya people are world-famous for their incredible arts and crafts, which they sell predominantly at local and regional open-air markets. There's a reason Chichicastenango's twice-weekly open-air market is so famous. The abundance and variety of wares for sale and the semicontrolled frenzy of the entire operation are not to be missed. You may find better bargains and products around the country, but you'll never see so much in one place at one time. See p. 206.
- **Diconte Artisans Shop** (Ataco, El Salvador): This five-room shop in the town of Ataco along the Rutas 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 cafe here. See p. 272.
- **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 Salvadorian life. See p. 246.
- **Guamilito Market** (San Pedro Sula, Honduras): Products from around the country, as well as El Salvador and Guatemala, fill up literally hundreds of small stalls at this market. You'll find everything from hammocks, T-shirts, and Lenca pottery to cigars, Maya figurines, jewelry, coffee, Garifuna coconut carvings, and tortilla stands. See p. 346.
- **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. 489.
- **Galería Namu** (San José, Costa Rica): This is my favorite gallery and gift shop in downtown San Jose, with an excellent collection of art and craft selections. These folks specialize in finding some of the better and more obscure

works done by Costa Rica's indigenous communities. See p. 560.

- **Mercado de Mariscos** (Calidonia, Panama City): This bustling market is *the* distribution headquarters for fresh seafood from the Pacific and the Caribbean. Even if you're not here to buy any fish, this is a fascinating place to see the everyday hustle and bustle of a typical

Panamanian market and check out the often weird and mysterious seafood selection. You can get some of the best sevice in the city from vendors located at the entrance to the market. The Mercado de Mariscos Restaurant on the second level serves tasty and authentic seafood dishes. See p. 661.

## 11 THE BEST OF CENTRAL AMERICA ONLINE

Below are some good Internet sources for each country, along with the recommendations on sites that cover the region in general. Each chapter in this book has more country-specific websites.

### COUNTRY-SPECIFIC SITES

- **www.toucantrail.com:** This is an excellent site about Belize geared toward budget travelers, with extensive links and comprehensive information.
- **www.travelbelize.org:** This is the official site of the Belize Tourist Board. It has its fair share of information and links, although you'll probably end up being directed to other sites.
- **www.revuemag.com:** This is an excellent Guatemalan-based English-language monthly magazine geared toward tourists and expatriates. The entire magazine, as well as past issues, is available online.
- **www.xelawho.com:** A slightly irreverent English-language magazine produced in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, and directed at the town's large population of foreign-language students, this site has honest reviews and a wealth of useful information.
- **www.corsatur.gob.sv:** This great English-language website groups information about El Salvador's attractions into the headings of nature/adventure/culture/and the beach. The site also provides a country map outlining El Salvador's 14 departments with demographic information for each.
- **www.letsghonduras.com:** This is the official site of the Honduras Tourist Board. It has a variety of roundup articles that are good for planning, and lists a decent range of basic information on the major towns, attractions, and national parks in the country.
- **www.intur.gob.ni** and **www.visitanicaragua.com:** The Nicaragua Tourist Board, or NTB, has two sites that are entirely in Spanish, with very limited information but some gorgeous imagery.
- **www.vianica.com:** This independent site about Nicaragua is much more informative than other sites and has data in English on the country, as well as some nifty features such as distance calculators and wildlife lists with photos.
- **www.ticotimes.net:** The English-language *Tico Times* makes it easy for *norteamericanos* (and other English speakers) to see what's happening in Costa Rica. It features the top story from its weekly print edition, as well as a daily update of news briefs, a business article, regional news, a fishing column, and travel reviews. There's also a link to current currency-exchange rates.
- **www.panamainfo.com:** This excellent website provides hotel, restaurant, and attraction information, as well as information on retiring, living, and doing business in Panama.

- **www.visitpanama.com:** The Panamanian Institute of Tourism regularly updates this website, which provides culture, history, and destination-specific information.

## CENTRAL AMERICAN SITES

- **www.latinworld.com:** This is a search engine specializing in Central America, providing information, resource links, and other websites.
- **www.latinamericabureau.org:** An independent website promoting better awareness of Central America, especially regarding human rights.
- **www.planeta.com:** This site deals with ecotourism and has some excellent content regarding Central America, including a directory of ecofriendly hotels and travel agencies.
- **www.bbc.co.uk:** The British broadcaster has an excellent world service section that covers in detail past and current affairs in the Americas.
- **www.lcweb2.loc.gov:** The library of Congress has detailed profiles of each country, including history and culture.
- **www.oas.org:** The Organization of American States is about the closest you will get to unity in the region. This site is not just for political animals but worth visiting for updates on ongoing issues and up-and-coming cultural events throughout the region.
- **www.lanic.utexas.edu:** The Latin America Network Information Center is a University of Texas initiative that provides an extensive directory and database. Primarily used for academic research, it also facilitates education programs.
- **www.alfatravelguide.com:** A small independent website that gives good listings for hotels and travel agents all over Central America, including contact information.
- **http://lanic.utexas.edu/la/ca:** This site houses a vast collection of information about Central America, and is hands-down the best one-stop shop for browsing, with helpful links to a diverse range of tourism and general information sites.