



## Are you visiting Central America?

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Visitors to Central America are usually welcomed with courtesy and warmth. In this diverse region you can visit major cosmopolitan cities, ruins of great ancient civilizations, primeval tropical rainforests and breathtaking locales.

More than 35 million people live in the countries of Central America, and they have a shared history. The early peoples of Central America developed different cultures and societies. The early 1500s brought Europeans that began establishing colonies in the region. Most of Central America came under the control of Spain, except Belize in the 1600's and the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua; and most regained independence from 1821 through 1981.

Mestizos, people of mixed European and Indian ancestry, are the region's largest ethnic group. People of African ancestry make up a significant minority, as well as various Indian peoples living in the region. Indian influenced Catholicism is the predominant religion (Spanish missionaries bringing the Roman Catholic religion which blended in existing Indian religions). Protestant Christians are a large minority, particularly in Belize. Spanish is the official language of most countries, except for Belize where English is spoken.

The Central American countries share many traditional foods and festivals. As in other Catholic countries, each town and country celebrates special saints' feast days, where images of the saints are paraded through the streets on colorful floats. The local parades and street fairs, which include local specialty food, plays and dancing, are not to be missed.

### INFORMATION ON SPECIFIC COUNTRIES

#### ***Belize***

Belize is a developing country, with a population of just over a quarter million people, it is the smallest country in Central America. Mayan ruins, coral reefs and coastal resorts attract many tourists; however, facilities for tourism vary in quality.

#### ***Costa Rica***

Costa Rica is a developing country, whose capital, San José, is located in the central highlands, along with the country's largest coffee farms. Tourist facilities, particularly in the capital, are generally adequate. The rainforests here are quite a draw for tourists. Costa Rica has had a long history of stable, democratic government, while their neighbors were torn by civil wars.

#### ***El Salvador***

El Salvador has a developing economy, but most Salvadorians live in poverty. Volcanic ash has left the country's soil the most fertile in the region. Tourist facilities are not fully developed. Credit cards are widely accepted. The Salvadoran constitution prohibits foreigners from participating in domestic political activities, including public demonstrations. Land mines and unexploded ammunition in back country regions still pose a threat to off-road tourists, backpackers and campers.

### ***Guatemala***

With the highest population of the Central American countries, 12 million, Guatemala also has a developing economy. There are luxury hotels in major cities and tourist destinations. Identification should be carried at all times.

### ***Honduras***

Honduras is a country of rugged mountains, where most of the population lives in mountain valleys and along the northern coast. Transportation is difficult and only 15% of the land is suitable for growing crops. Tourist facilities are generally adequate. With safe bottled water widely available, it is advised not to drink tap water. Medical care is limited, particularly outside of Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula. It is also extremely difficult to arrange for the transfer of funds from abroad to Honduras. If you travel to rural areas and to the border regions near Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua, exercise caution due to armed bands in these areas.

### ***Nicaragua***

Nicaragua is the largest Central American country, with coasts on both the Pacific Ocean and Caribbean Sea. They have also been rebuilding since the end of a long civil war, which ended in 1990. Nicaragua has a developing economy and lacks an extensive tourist infrastructure. Travelers' checks are accepted at a few major hotels and may be exchanged for local currency at authorized exchange facilities. Although many restaurants and hotels now accept credit cards, acceptance is not widespread. Travel in remote areas in the northern and central areas is strongly discouraged because of violent crime.

### ***Panama***

Panama lies between Costa Rica and Colombia, with most of the population living near the Panama Canal. Canal fees and industries make the canal area the country's most prosperous region. Outside the Panama City area, tourist facilities vary in quality. The Pan American Highway ends at Yaviza in the Darien Province, and the final portion from Chepo to Yaviza is reasonably passable only during the dry season (January-April).