

CENTRAL AMERICA



My Drift

Title: Central America

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Date: 30 Nov 2017

Article Number: 274-2017-30

I have written articles about countries and cities all around the world, but I somehow missed Central America. Since I'm getting old and forgetful and might not ever get back to this part of the world, I have decided to write a little bit about all seven countries that make up Central America (See above map).

Central America (Spanish: América Central or Centroamérica) is the central geographic region of the Americas and specifically part of the continent known as North America. It goes from the northwestern borders of Belize and Guatemala to the Isthmus of Panama. There it connects to the Colombian Pacific Lowlands in South America. Central America lies between the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea.

Central America has an area of 202,000 square miles and an estimated population of 43 million people.

Most of Central America rests on the Caribbean Plate. The region is geologically active. It has regular volcanic eruptions and earthquakes.



The 1976 Guatemala 7.4 magnitude earthquake killed over 23,000 people. Managua, the capital of Nicaragua, was devastated by earthquakes in 1931 and 1972. The last one killed about 5,000 people. Three earthquakes hit El Salvador. The first one in 1986 and two in 2001. An earthquake devastated northern and central Costa Rica in 2009. It killed at least 35 people. In Honduras a powerful earthquake happened in 2009.

Volcanic eruptions are common. In 1968 the Arenal Volcano in Costa Rica erupted and killed at least 87 people. The three villages of Tabacon, Pueblo Nuevo, and San Luis were buried under ash.

Central America has many mountain ranges; the longest are the Sierra Madre de Chiapas, the Cordillera Isabelia and the Cordillera de Talamanca. Most of the population of Honduras, Costa Rica and Guatemala live in valleys, between mountains. Valleys are also suitable for the production of coffee, beans, and other crops.

We will start with the northeast country of Belize and work our way down in a southeast direction to Panama. Don't miss the "Recap" at the end of this article. I will analyze the pros and cons of each country and pick the Central America country I would most like to visit.



Area: 8,800 square miles
Population: 388,000
Capital: Belmopan (pop. 22,000)
Largest city: Belize City (pop. 62,000)
Official language: English
Recognized languages: Spanish, Belizean Creole, Garifuna, and Mayan
Ethnic groups: 53% Mestizo - 26% Creole
Currency: Belize dollar (BZD)
Religion: 40% Roman Catholic – 32% Protestant
Motto: "Under the shade I flourish"

Belize is a nation on the eastern coast of Central America, with Caribbean Sea shorelines to the east and dense jungle to the west. Its mainland is about 180 miles long and 68 miles wide. Offshore, the massive Belize Barrier Reef, dotted with hundreds of low-lying islands called cayes, hosts rich marine life. Belize's jungle areas are home to Mayan ruins like Caracol, renowned for its towering pyramid; lagoon-side Lamanai; and Altun Ha, just outside Belize City.



Great Belize Barrier Reef



Colorful Coral Reefs

Belize has a diverse society, composed of many cultures and languages that reflect its rich history. English is the official language of Belize, while Belizean Creole is an unofficial native language. Over half the population is multilingual, with Spanish being the second most common spoken language.

Belize is known for its September Celebrations, its extensive barrier reef coral reefs, its jungles, and punta music.



Mayan Jungle



Belize Jaguar



Scarlet Macaw

Brief History

The Maya civilization spread across what is now Belize around 1500 BC, and flourished there until Spanish explorers arrived in the 16th century. Spanish conquistadors explored the land and declared it a Spanish colony but chose not to settle and develop because of its lack of resources and the hostile Indian tribes. Next come the English and Scottish settlers and pirates known as the Baymen who entered the area in the 17th century. The area of what is now known as Belize was part of the British Empire (1862–1981) and was called British Honduras. Belize was granted independence on 21 September 1981.

A Few Facts

Belize has the only Jaguar reserve in the world which is known as Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary.

The islands in and around Belize are called Cayes (pronounced “keys”) and total around 450 including those on the outer atolls.

Belize has around 900 Maya temple sites.

Belize is in the Central Standard Time zone and does not observe daylight saving time.

Belize is subtropical, with a mean annual temperature of 80 degrees F.

Belize’s Black Howler Monkeys are one of the top 10 loudest animals in the world.

Over 1 million tourists’ visit Belize annually of which 70% of are Americans.

Belize is one of the least populated countries in the world.

More than 400 species of fish live in the waters of Belize’s 185-mile long Barrier Reef.



Area: 42,000 square miles

Population: 17,000,000

Capital and largest city: Guatemala City (pop. 1,200,000)

Other large cities: Mixco (pop. 477,000) and Villa Nueva (pop. 410,000)

Official language: Spanish

Ethnic groups: 42% mestizo - 41% indigenous peoples

Currency: Quetzal (GTQ)

Religion: 48% Roman Catholic – 34% Protestant

Motto: "The Land of the Eternal Spring"

Guatemala is located just south of Mexico and is home to many volcanoes, rainforests and ancient Mayan sites. The capital, Guatemala City, features the stately National Palace of Culture and the National Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology. Antigua, west of the capital, contains preserved Spanish colonial buildings. Lake Atitlán, formed in a massive volcanic crater, is surrounded by coffee fields and villages. Mysterious and often challenging, Central America's most diverse country offers landscapes and experiences that have been captivating travelers for centuries.



Volcano – City protected by the Cross



Lake Atitlan

Brief History

The territory of modern Guatemala once formed the core of the Maya civilization, which extended across Mesoamerica. Most of the country was conquered by the Spanish in the 16th century, becoming part of the New Spain. Guatemala attained independence in 1821 as part of the Federal Republic of Central America, which dissolved in 1841.

From the mid to late 19th century, Guatemala experienced chronic instability and civil strife. Beginning in the early 20th century, it was ruled by a series of dictators backed by the United States government. In 1944, authoritarian leader Jorge Ubico was overthrown by a pro-democratic military coup, initiating a decade-long revolution that led to sweeping social and economic reforms. A U.S.-backed military coup in 1954 ended the revolution and installed a dictatorship.

From 1960 to 1996, Guatemala endured a bloody civil war fought between the US-backed government and leftist rebels, including genocidal massacres of the Maya population perpetrated by the military. Since a United Nations-negotiated peace accord, Guatemala has witnessed both economic growth and successful democratic elections, though it continues to struggle with high rates of poverty, crime, drug trade, and instability.

Top Tourist Attractions



Mayan Ruins of Tikal



City of Antigua

A Few Facts

Guatemala has 30 volcanoes – three of which are still active. Many people live in the mountains, where it is cool and rainy. Others live along the coastline. People in Guatemala grow coffee, bananas, and other crops. Most people live in small, isolated villages. They may not have running water or electricity.

69 percent of adults can read - People in Guatemala can expect to live 64 years.



Area: 43,400 square miles

Population: 9,200,000

Capital and largest city: Tegucigalpa (pop. 1,200,000)

Other large cities: San Pedro Sula (pop. 650,000) and Choloma (pop. 225,000)

Official language: Spanish

Ethnic group: 90% Mestizo

Currency: Honduran lempira (HNL)

Religion: 52% Roman Catholic – 36% Protestant

Motto: "Free, Sovereign and Independent"

Honduras has at times been referred to as Spanish Honduras to differentiate it from British Honduras, which became modern-day Belize. Honduras is bordered to the west by Guatemala, to the southwest by El Salvador, to the southeast by Nicaragua, to the south by the Pacific Ocean at the Gulf of Fonseca, and to the north by the Gulf of Honduras, a large inlet of the Caribbean Sea.

Honduras was home to several important Mesoamerican cultures, most notably the Maya, before the Spanish invaded in the sixteenth century. The Spanish introduced Roman Catholicism and the now predominant Spanish language, along with numerous customs that have blended with the indigenous culture. Honduras became independent in 1821 and has since been a republic, although it has consistently endured much social strife and political instability, and remains one of the poorest countries in the Western Hemisphere. Honduras has the world's highest murder rate.

Its northern portions are part of the Western Caribbean Zone, as reflected in the area's demographics and culture. Honduras is known for its rich natural resources, including minerals, coffee, tropical fruit, and sugar cane, as well as for its growing textiles industry, which serves the international market.

Yes, Honduras is famous for being the drug and murder capital of the world.



The good news is things are getting better in Honduras. Residents feel safer and the tourist trade has started picking up.



Honduras Open Market



Honduras Caribbean Beach

A Few Facts

- 1. Christopher Columbus discovered Honduras. And when he set foot on ground his first words were: “Thank God we got out these great depths!” Honduras’ literal meaning is: Great Depths.**
- 2. The Bay Islands sit on the second largest coral reef in the world.**
- 3. Copan Mayan Ruins are considered the most important ruins for the fully intact hieroglyphs. The main source of how we know Maya history today.**
- 4. The five stars on the Honduran flag represent the five countries of Central America. With the middle star representing Honduras, because it’s the only country that touches four of the Central America countries.**
- 9. Honduras is home to several venomous snakes, including: The Green Palm Pit Viper, the Coral Snake, and the Middle American Rattlesnake.**



Area: 8,120 square miles

Population: 6,400,000

Capital and largest city: San Salvador (pop. 540,000)

Other large cities: Soyapango (pop. 330,000) and Santa Ana (pop. 180,000)



San Salvador



Soyapango



Santa Ana

Official language: Spanish

Largest ethnic group: 86% Mestizo

Currency: US Dollar

Religion: 47% Roman Catholic – 33% Protestant

Motto: "God, Unity, Freedom"

El Salvador literally means the "Republic of The Savior". It is the smallest and the most densely populated country in Central America. El Salvador's capital and largest city is San Salvador.

El Salvador was for centuries inhabited by several Mesoamerican nations, especially the Cuzcatlecs, as well as the Lenca and Maya. In the early 16th century, the Spanish Empire conquered the territory, incorporating it into the Viceroyalty of New Spain ruled from Mexico City. In 1821, the country achieved independence from Spain as part of the First Mexican Empire, only to further secede as part of the Federal Republic of Central America in 1823. Upon the republic's dissolution in 1841, El

Salvador became sovereign until forming a short-lived union with Honduras and Nicaragua called the Greater Republic of Central America, which lasted from 1895 to 1898.

From the late 19th to the mid-20th century, El Salvador endured chronic political and economic instability characterized by coups, revolts, and a succession of authoritarian rulers. Persistent socioeconomic inequality and civil unrest culminated in the devastating Salvadoran Civil War (1979–1992), which was fought between the military-led government and a coalition of left-wing guerrilla groups. The conflict ended with a negotiated settlement that established a multiparty constitutional republic, which remains in place to this day. However, the country continues to struggle with high rates of poverty, inequality, and crime.



Coatepeque Lake El Salvador



Pacific Ocean Beach

Some El Salvador Facts

- El Salvador is known as the Land of Volcanoes.
- El Salvador is the only country in Central America that does not have a coastline on the Caribbean Sea.
- Coffee, sugar, corn, rice, shrimp, and beef are the main agricultural products in El Salvador.
- The country has declared five national parks - El Imposible, Cerro Verde, El Boqueron, Conchagua and Montecristo.
- International surfing competitions have taken place in El Salvador because of its great beaches and high surf.
- Salvadoran women often pat each other on the right forearm or shoulder, rather than shake hands.
- In El Salvador, only close friends may hug and kiss on the right cheek as a sign of respect in greeting others.
- Never arrive on time when invited to a home. Although it may sound strange you should arrive a little later than invited like 30 minutes late.



Area: 42,000 square miles

Population: 6,300,000

Capital and largest city: Managua (pop. 1,300,000)

Other large cities: Matagalpa (pop. 155,000) and León (pop. 145,000)

Official language: Spanish (English is a recognized language)

Ethnic groups: 69% Mestizo - 17% White

Currency: Córdoba (NIO)

Religion: 73% Roman Catholic – 15% Evangelical churches

(There is a significant LDS missionary effort in Nicaragua, with two missions, and about 100,000 Mormons.)

Motto: "In God We Trust"



Lake Managua



Stratovolcano Momotombo

Nicaragua, set between the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea, is a Central American nation known for its dramatic terrain of lakes, volcanoes and beaches. Vast Lake Managua and the iconic stratovolcano Momotombo sit north of the capital Managua. To its south is Granada, noted for its Spanish colonial architecture and an archipelago of navigable islets rich in tropical bird life.



Mission churches and colonial Spanish architecture



Exotic birds including the colorful Nicaragua Toucan

A Few Interesting Nicaragua Facts

The name of this country is a combination of 2 words, “Nicarao” who was the renowned chief of the native Indian tribe “agua” – a Spanish word that literally translates as “water.”

Each city in this country has an official Saint, also referred to as the “Santo Patrono,” that has been designated since colonial times.

Much of Nicaraguan food is based on cassava, rice, corn, chili pepper, and beans. The national dish is “gallo pinto,” a combination of cooked white rice and red beans.

Even though there isn’t a law to make school mandatory, up to 70 percent of children are enrolled and education is very valuable in Nicaragua.

The infrastructure was severely damaged in 1998 by Hurricane Mitch, that destroyed several villages and killed more than 10,000 people.

More than 1 million people visit this country every year.

Wildlife includes the deer, puma, armadillo, monkey, parrot, alligator, peccary, macaw, and a few species of snakes.

Baseball is the national game and is even more popular than soccer.

Lake Nicaragua it is the largest lake in Central America.



Area: 19,700 square miles

Population: 5,000,000

Capital and largest city: San Jose (pop. 340,000)

Official language: Spanish

Ethnic groups: 84% White/Castizo or Mestizo

Currency: Costa Rican Colón (CRC)

Religion: 71% Roman Catholic – 14% Evangelical Protestants

Motto: “Pura Vida” meaning pure or simple life

Costa Rica is a rugged, rainforested Central American country with coastlines on the Caribbean and Pacific. Though its capital, San Jose, is home to cultural institutions like the Pre-Columbian Gold Museum, Costa Rica is known for its beaches, volcanoes, and biodiversity. Roughly a quarter of its area is made up of protected jungle, teeming with wildlife including spider monkeys and quetzal birds.



Costa Rica Jungle



Costa Rica Spider Monkey

Costa Rica is bordered by Nicaragua to the north, Panama to the southeast, the Pacific Ocean to the west, the Caribbean Sea to the east, and Ecuador to the south of Cocos Island.

Costa Rica has been known for its stable democracy in a region that has had a lot of instability and for its highly educated workforce, most of whom speak English. The country spends roughly 7% of its budget on education, compared to a global average of 4.4%. They have a 96% literacy rate. Its economy, once heavily dependent on agriculture, has diversified to include sectors such as finance, corporate services for foreign companies, pharmaceuticals, and ecotourism.

Costa Rica was sparsely inhabited by indigenous people before coming under Spanish rule in the 16th century. It remained a peripheral colony of the empire until independence as part of the short-lived First Mexican Empire, followed by membership in the United Provinces of Central America, from which it formally declared sovereignty in 1847. Since then, Costa Rica has remained among the most stable, prosperous, and progressive nations in Latin America. Following a brief civil war, it permanently abolished its army in 1949, becoming one of only a few sovereign nations without a standing army.

Cocos Island is an island designated as a National Park off the shore of Costa Rica, that does not allow inhabitants other than Costa Rican Park Rangers



Cocos Island



La Fortuna Waterfall Blue Jungle

A Few Facts

- 1. Costa Ricans call themselves Ticos and Ticas.**
- 2. More than 25% of Costa Rican land is protected national parks and refuges.**
- 3. Costa Rica has a dry season that runs December-April and a rainy season that runs May-November.**
- 4. The average life expectancy of 77 years is one of the highest in the world.**
- 5. Costa Rica is a popular choice for American expatriates who want to retire in the tropics.**
- 6. The average Tico makes \$6,000 a year and the average wage labor is \$10 per day, the highest in Central America.**



Area: 29,120 square miles

Population: 4,100,000

Capital and largest city: Panama City (pop. 880,000)

Other large cities: Mixco (pop. 477,000) and Villa Nueva (pop. 410,000)

Official language: Spanish

Ethnic groups: 65% Mestizo - 12.3% Native Panamanians

Currency: Balboa (PAB) and the United States dollar (USD)

Motto: "For the Benefit of the World"

Religion: 75% Roman Catholic – 20% Protestant

(The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) have more than 40,000 members. The Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Episcopalians with between 7,000 and 10,000 members each, Jewish and Muslim communities with approximately 10,000 members each.)

Brief History

Panama was inhabited by several indigenous tribes prior to settlement by the Spanish in the 16th century. Panama broke away from Spain in 1821 and joined a union of Nueva Granada, Ecuador, and Venezuela named the Republic of Gran Colombia. When Gran Colombia dissolved in 1831, Panama and Nueva Granada remained joined, eventually becoming the Republic of Colombia. With the backing of the United States, Panama seceded from Colombia in 1903, allowing the Panama Canal to be built by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers between 1904 and 1914. In 1977 an agreement was signed for the transfer of the Canal from the United States to Panama by December 31, 1999.

Revenue from canal tolls continues to represent a significant portion of Panama's GDP, although commerce, banking, and tourism are major and growing sectors. Panama has been the second-most competitive economy in Latin America. Covering around 40% of its land area, Panama's jungles are home to an abundance of tropical plants and animals – some of them found nowhere else on the planet.



Panama City



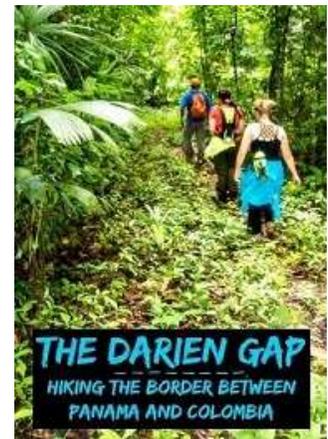
Panama Canal



Panama Beach



Panama Monkey



A Few Panama Facts

Panama is the only place in the world where you can see the sun rise on the Pacific and set on the Atlantic.

Panama City is the only capital city in the world that has a rain forest within its city limits.

Panama celebrates two independence days, the first from Spain in 1821 and the second from Colombia 82 years later in 1903.

More than 12,000 people died during the construction of the Panama Railroad.

Panama is home to 10,000 different plants species, including 1,400 varieties of orchids, 678 ferns, and more than 1,500 varieties of trees. They have more than 976 bird species, which is more than the United States and Canada combined.

Panama grows some of the world's finest coffee, which can be tasted at Starbucks and other coffee houses worldwide.

Volcán Barú is an active volcano and the tallest mountain in Panama at 11,400 feet.

Central America Recap

Okay, we have learned a little bit about each Central America country. Now I'm going to determine which one of these seven countries I would most like to visit. I will use the information I have gained doing the research for each country. We will also do some specific Google searches to learn more. Then I will pick the best Central America country to visit.

Weather. Central America has great weather all year long. Temperatures during the day are between 80 and 90 degrees. Each has a dry season that runs December-April and a rainy season that runs May-November. I prefer to visit during the dry season.

Language. Which countries speak the most English? Spanish is the primary language in Central America. However, more people can speak English in Belize. Not far behind are Nicaragua and Panama.

Ethnic groups. Which countries have the biggest percentage of white people? Costa Rica, Guatemala, and Nicaragua.

Religion. The predominant religion in Central America is Christianity (95%). Most people are Roman Catholics. Nicaragua has the most Mormons.

Which countries have the best economy? Panama and Costa Rica.

Currency. Which countries take US dollars? Panama and El Salvador.

Tourism. Which countries are most friendly to visitors? Belize, Costa Rica, and Nicaragua.

Airports. Best is Panama City (Panama). Worst is San Salvador (El Salvador).

Earthquakes. El Salvador is an earthquake prone country and has suffered immense damage due to quakes in the region.

Roads. Some officials say, "Don't Drive through Mexico or Central America: You Will Be Kidnapped, Killed, or Worse!" Now wait a second – what can be worse than getting kidnapped and murdered?

Safety. Which countries are the safest and most dangerous? Safest are Costa Rica and Panama. Most dangerous are El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala.

Most scenic. All countries are very scenic.

Best beaches. Little Corn Island, Nicaragua - Santa Teresa, Costa Rica - Bocas Del Toro, Panama - Playa Gigante, Nicaragua - Caye Caulker, Belize

Best beer. You knew this was coming – right? All beer is good. Here are the leading brands in each country:

- **Panama - Cerveza Panama and Soberana**
- **Belize – Belikin**
- **Costa Rica – Bavaria**
- **Nicaragua – Victoria**
- **El Salvador - The Salvadorean beers**
- **Guatemala – Gallo**
- **Honduras - Salva Vida**

Okay, I think we have enough information. Have you made your choice? Here are my picks starting with the countries I least want to visit:

- **Honduras - (The murder and drug capital of the world. Do I need to say more?)**
- **El Salvador - (Very high rates of poverty and crime)**
- **Guatemala – (High rates of poverty, crime, drug trade, and instability)**
- **Belize – (Has very scenic beaches and dense jungle with many beautiful birds and animals. English is the official language. I wouldn't mind going there)**
- **Nicaragua – (There are many different things to do and see in this country)**
- **Costa Rica – (Probably the safest Central America country with many things to do and see)**
- **Panama – (Kind of safe and I would like to see the Panama Canal and visit Panama City)**

So, the Central America country I would most like to visit is Panama. Costa Rica, Nicaragua, and Belize would also be good. Since I don't have a death wish, I will stay away from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras.

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