

Central America Directory

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This chapter provides general information on Central America. Country-specific details are included in the Directory at the back of each country chapter. Also, each country title page displays 'key facts' information, such as travel tips and popular border crossings.

ACCOMMODATIONS

Central America's sleeping options range from thin-wall sand-floor shacks to luxury beach resorts. This book focuses on the cheap guys: bunk-bed hostels, *casas de huéspedes* (guesthouses) with fan-cooled rooms and shared bathrooms, lean-to cabañas (bungalows) on a beach, or simply trees to hang a hammock from. A few worthy splurges – of US\$50 or more – are noted here and there.

Unless otherwise noted, prices listed in the book reflect high-season rates (roughly July and August, Christmas to Easter) and include applicable national taxes. Prices do change; use the prices in this book as a gauge, not law. Showing the price listed in the book is a far less successful tactic to getting a lower rate than simply asking for a discount. Do ask. When business is slow or if you're planning on staying several nights, it's often possible to get a cheaper rate. Be prepared to take 'no' for an answer.

Generally Nicaragua, Honduras and Guatemala are the cheapest countries, Mexico and Belize (and many beach destinations), the most expensive. Variables are whether you have a private bathroom, cold water and can handle a fan over air-con (air-con can double the cost in many places!). Generally, hostels are usually around US\$6 to US\$8 per person, and OK hotels (with shared bathroom and fan) are about US\$10 to US\$15 per double in the bulk of Central America – if your math skills are in practice, you'll see two people can often stay in a hotel for less than in a dorm.

Reservations – by email, phone or fax – are not possible at many places, much less needed. Key exceptions are tourist areas during peak season, particularly during *Semana Santa* (Easter Week) when locals are traveling around the region too.

Camping

Organized campgrounds aren't commonly found in the region. If you plan on camping, bring your own gear. And bug repellent. Facilities at campgrounds can vary: some have fire pits, latrines and water. Others have *nada*. Nothing.

Some hostels set aside areas for campers. Some national parks and reserves (particularly in Costa Rica) have basic facilities, but they can be hit-and-miss – sometimes packed and noisy. Prices range from US\$3 to US\$10 per person. In some places it's feasible to ask to camp on private land.

Guesthouses & Hotels

The most popular places to stay are the cheap guesthouses and hotels. Many are small (10 or

so rooms) and family run, and (depending on the family) can be fun, attractive and offer cheap deals that practically plead for another night. That said, you can also expect a night or two on a lumpy bed with smeared mosquito remains on the walls and a smelly leaky-faucet shower (thankfully) down the hall.

Most rooms have a fan and shared bathroom. Many do not provide a towel or soap. Rooms with air-con and TV (generally US\$20 and up) start at double the price of a room with fan. Generally breakfast is not included in the overnight rate.

'Hot water' can be lukewarm and working only at certain hours of the day. Beware of the electric shower: a cold-water shower-head juiced by an electric heating element. Don't touch it, or anything metal, while in the shower or you may get a shock.

Used toilet paper should be placed in the receptacle provided.

We've tried our best to avoid including places used by the 'hourly' crowd or prostitutes. If you stumble on some we've included, please let us know.

Hammocks & Bungalows

Sleeping in a hammock can make for a breezier night than on a bed in a stuffy room. Many beach towns have hammock rooms or areas; it's generally the same price as a dorm for a space (and a hammock). Beach cabañas (or *cabinas*) provide memorable stays on the beach or in the jungle. Many of these are simple thatched-roof huts with a dirt or sand floor; others are electrified deals, with fans and fine décor.

Homestays

Nothing offers more insight into local culture than staying with a local family. Towns with Spanish-language school scenes, such as Antigua or Quetzaltenango in Guatemala, or Granada in Nicaragua, can arrange homestays for their students. Many can even arrange for you to stay with a family for a week or longer, even if you're not studying. Homestays can be arranged in many other towns as well. A week's stay ranges from US\$50 to US\$70 per person, including most meals. See Studying in the Directory for individual countries, or Courses listed under individual towns for more information. See p18 for a suggested itinerary that takes in many opportunities for homestays.

Hostels

Hostels are found throughout Central America – generally charging US\$3 to US\$10 for a bunk, usually US\$8 or so – though your Hostelling International (HI) membership isn't particularly useful here, as many hostels are independently run. Mexico and Costa Rica are exceptions, with many HI-affiliated hostels.

ACTIVITIES

Coastal fun is Central America's most popular draw for tourists: the Pacific is booming on surfers' itineraries, while the Caribbean has the best diving and most of the white-sand beaches. Mountains and volcanoes run through most of the region, offering many compelling (and often tough) hiking and cycling options.

See the Directories for each country for specific details on activities available throughout the region. Also see p11 for a list of our favorite activities and p16 for an activity-based itinerary.

Canopy Tours

These zip-line trips sliding over jungle and mountains may not be the most natural of Central American activities, but you can at least tickle your inner Tarzan. You'll find opportunities all over Costa Rica, including US\$45 trips in Monteverde (p575). Outside La Ceiba in Honduras there's a choice; either p395, or an hour-long zip nearby (p399) costs US\$36 – about the same cost to go down Volcán Mombacho outside Granada, Nicaragua (p495).

Cycling

Many shops rent bicycles for local exploring. Some places offer guided cycling trips – such as to Maya villages from San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Mexico (p69) and coffee plantations or ridge rides from Antigua, Guatemala (p108). Cycling is also a fine way to explore local villages in other countries, though it is best to bring your own bike for these trips (along with proof that you own the bike).

See p741 for a quick rundown on the joys and pitfalls of cycling your way around the region.

Diving & Snorkeling

Some of Latin America's (and the world's) finest diving and snorkeling spots are found

SAFETY GUIDELINES FOR DIVING

Before embarking on a scuba-diving, skin-diving or snorkeling trip, carefully consider the following points to ensure a safe and enjoyable experience. Also see p411 for tips on not harming coral during a reef dive.

- Possess a current diving certification card from a recognized scuba-diving instructional agency (if scuba diving).
- Be sure you are healthy and feel comfortable diving.
- Obtain reliable information about physical and environmental conditions at the dive site (eg from a reputable local dive operator).
- Be aware of local laws, regulations and etiquette relating to marine life and the environment.
- Dive only at sites within your realm of experience; if available, engage the services of a competent, professionally trained dive instructor or dive master.
- Be aware that underwater conditions vary significantly from one region, or even site, to another. Seasonal changes can significantly alter any site and dive conditions. These differences influence the way divers dress for a dive and what diving techniques they use.

along the barrier reefs off Central America's Caribbean shores. Sites up and down the coast – from Mexico to Panama – offer rich marine life, sunken ships and deep holes. Some of the most famous dive spots can be found at Bay Islands, Honduras (p408); Cozumel, Mexico (p51); the reefs off Belize's northern cayes (p230); and the more low-key Corn Islands, Nicaragua (p516).

Honduras' Bay Islands are famous for good-value dives and scuba courses; taking the four-day Professional Association of Diving Instructors (PADI) open-water diving certification course here costs about US\$250, about US\$100 cheaper than in Mexico.

Region-wide, snorkeling day trips out to a couple of reef spots can be taken for US\$10 to US\$30 or so, and dives start at around US\$25 or US\$35 in Honduras, or US\$70 in Mexico. Most dive shops will rent diving equipment – always check it carefully before going under. Be sure to bring evidence of your certification if you plan to dive.

It's possible to dive in the Pacific too, though conditions are generally murkier. The best time for diving in the Pacific is October to February. San Juan del Sur (p500) in Nicaragua has a dive shop. The crater lakes in Laguna de Apoyo, Nicaragua (see p495) are another good option.

Mexico offers other-worldly dives in cenotes (limestone sinkholes filled with rain water). Check some options reachable from Tulum (p54).

For safety considerations, see above.

Also check out Lonely Planet's detailed diving guides to Cozumel, the Bay Islands and Belize.

Hiking

Central America's stunning natural environment, volcanoes and abundant wildlife makes for great hiking. The terrain ranges from cloud and rain forests to lowland jungles, river trails and palm-lined beaches.

Jungle trekking can be strenuous, and hikers should be prepared. If you want to camp, bring your own gear as its availability is limited here.

Popular hikes in the region range from volcanoes around Antigua in Guatemala (p107) or El Imposible in El Salvador (p304), to prehistoric rock carvings on Nicaragua's Isla de Ometepe (p504), a wilderness beach at Costa Rica's Península de Nicoya (p601) or coffee-scented hills around Panama's only volcano, Volcán Barú, in the Chiriquí highlands (p678).

The ultimate would be the 60km hike to Guatemala's El Mirador (p204), a sprawling, largely unexcavated Maya city reached by an intense hike into the El Petén jungle a couple days each way. Less demanding, but no shorter, is the hike through modern Maya villages from Nebaj (p134) to Todos Santos, also in Guatemala.

Surfing

Surfing's popularity is on the rise in Central America, with many places renting boards

TOP SURFING SPOTS

Here's our pick of the best on offer.

Guatemala Sipacate (p157)

El Salvador Punta Roca, at La Libertad (p291)

Nicaragua Las Salina (west of Rivas; p486)

Costa Rica Experts-only Salsa Brava, at Puerto Vieja de Talamanca (p567) or Pavones' three-minute left (p622)

Panama Waves at Santa Catalina (p693) and Bocas del Toro's (p685)

For more top surfing spots in the region, see the boxed texts, p292 (El Salvador), p486 (Nicaragua), and p593 (Costa Rica).

to tackle 'perfect' breaks. Costa Rica has the most developed scene, but low-key spots in El Salvador and Nicaragua are, to some, the best places. If you've never surfed, you can find surf lessons for as cheap as US\$10, such as at El Salvador's Playa El Tunco (p293). Madera Surf Camp, near San Juan del Sur in Nicaragua (p500), has US\$2 hammock spots facing one of the country's most popular waves. Costa Rica's increasingly popular Malpais (p601) is a big surf camp on the Península de Nicoya, with lessons and US\$10 bunks.

White-Water Rafting

Some of the best white-water rafting in the tropics can be found in Central America, and rafting is fast becoming popular all over Latin America. Guatemala and Honduras are developing a rafting industry, and a number of rivers there offer anything from frothing Class IV white water to easy Class II floats. Costa Rica leads the pack in river adventure sports, with many tour operators to choose from. See those countries' Directory for more details on rafting opportunities.

Wildlife-Watching

The unexpected appearance of a toucan, howler monkey, sloth, crocodile, iguana, dolphin or puma rushing past makes for the greatest rush on your trip, and the wildlife-viewing and birding opportunities in every part of Central America are world class. A system of national parks, wildlife refuges, biosphere reserves and other protected areas throughout the region facilitates independent bird and wildlife viewing. Even private areas such as gardens around hotels in the country-

side can yield a sample of birds, insects, reptiles and even monkeys.

Early morning and late afternoon are the best times to watch for wildlife activity anywhere.

Leading the rest in terms of wildlife density is Costa Rica, with remarkable places such as the pristine Parque Nacional Corcovado (p618) and many others.

The elusive quetzal – and hordes of other implausibly colorful birds – can be seen at many places; a couple of spots include Honduras' Lago de Yojoa (p359) and Panama's Volcán Barú in the Chiriquí highlands (p678). Belize's Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary (p238) is another hot spot for birders. Morning bird tours at Tikal, Guatemala (p199) add to the experience of seeing the ruins.

Howler monkeys (named for their frightening tiger-like roar) can be seen in treetops around the region, such as on an unforgettable walk through the Yaxchilán Maya ruins (p62) on the Mexico–Guatemala border. The black howler lives only in Belize, and can be seen at the Bermudian Landing Community Baboon Sanctuary (p237).

The best places to see sea turtles are Parque Nacional Tortuguero (p571) in Costa Rica or Refugio de vida Silvestre La Flor (p503) in Nicaragua. Coral reefs are an excellent place to see sea turtles, stingrays, sharks and tons of smaller, more colorful creatures. See p720 for some of Central America's top dive sites.

See p12 for some of the best places to see wildlife. Also see *Where to Watch Birds in Central America, Mexico & the Caribbean*, by Nigel Wheatley, and Lonely Planet's *Watching Wildlife Central America* and *Watching Wildlife Costa Rica* guides.

BOOKS

Suggested reads can be found at relevant sections throughout this guide; see each country Directory for country-specific suggestions. The following books will help with pretrip preparation (and dreaming). Also see p22.

Lonely Planet

Along with country-specific guidebooks to the region, Lonely Planet publishes an in-depth guide to the land of the Maya: *Belize, Guatemala & Yucatán*. If you're heading south from Central America, pick up a copy of *South America*, and there are also several Caribbean titles.

Other useful titles from LP include *Healthy Travel Central & South America*, a guide to minimizing common health risks on the road, and *Read This First: Central & South America*, a know-before-you-go book that covers trip-planning essentials. *Travel Photography: A Guide to Taking Better Pictures* provides some excellent advice on getting the most out of your travel photos.

Also consider reading Lonely Planet's *Latin American Spanish Phrasebook*, and *Travel With Children*.

Travel Literature

The number of books on Central America (travelogues and political essays) swelled during the turbulent '80s and into the early '90s, but have waned in the years since. Many good ones are now, unfortunately, no longer in stock.

Travelers' Tales Central America: True Stories, edited by Larry Habegger, is a collection of glories and failures of trips in the region.

John L Stephens' widely available classic *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan*, in two volumes, date from the 1840s. These volumes provided the world with the first glimpses of the Maya cities and still provide a good, popular overview.

Ronald Wright's *Time Among the Maya* is a story of travels through the whole Maya region – Guatemala, Mexico, Belize and Honduras – delving into the glorious past and exploited present of the Maya people. Though written in the troubled 1980s, it's still one of the best on-the-road reads of the area.

So Far from God: A Journey to Central America, by Patrick Marnham, was the winner of the 1985 Thomas Cook Travel Book Award. It follows the author's leisurely meander from Texas down to Mexico City and on into Central America. Glen David Short's *An Odd Odyssey: California to Colombia by Bus and Boat* is a much more recent version of a half-year trip through Mexico and Central America.

Dig around for Lonely Planet's out-of-print *Green Dreams: Travels in Central America*, by Stephen Benz, an interesting account of years of trips to Latin America.

BUSINESS HOURS

Much of Central America takes lunch off: that includes some tourist offices, banks and even a restaurant or two. Though opening hours

STANDARD HOURS

In this guidebook, for the sake of brevity only variations on standard business hours are included in reviews; otherwise standard hours are assumed. Restaurants are expected to be open roughly 8am to midnight, bars 8am to 2am or so, shops 10am to 8pm, and tourist information offices 8am to 5pm Monday to Friday or Saturday.

can vary regionwide (see country Directories for details), generally banks stick it out and don't break for siesta; some are open Saturday mornings as well. Sunday is a real shut-down day in much of the region.

Government offices tend to work shorter hours (8am to 4pm or 5pm) weekdays only, with a couple of hours off at midday. Other businesses are open similar hours (closed for siesta from 12:30pm to 2pm or so), but often have Saturday hours too.

CLIMATE

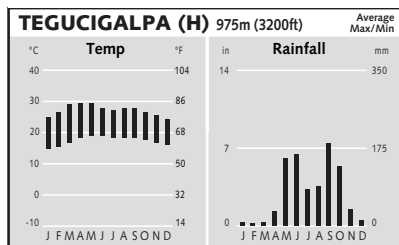
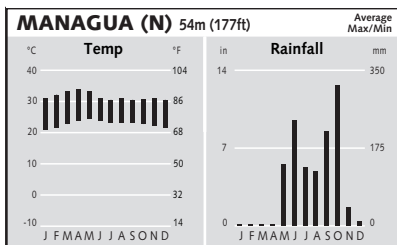
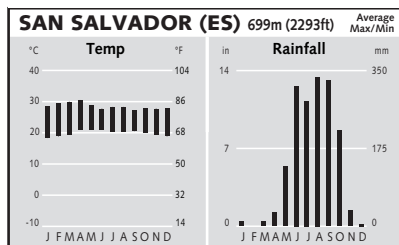
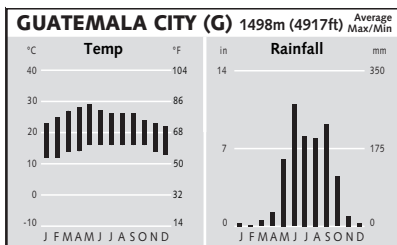
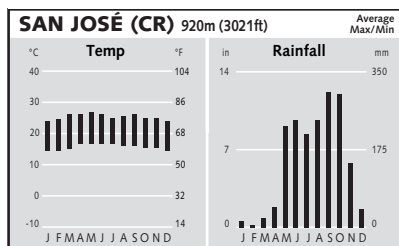
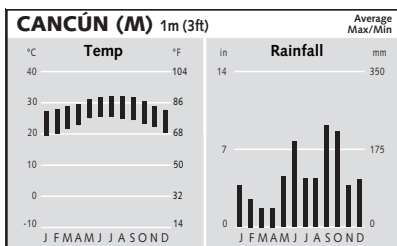
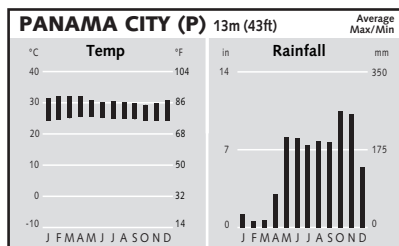
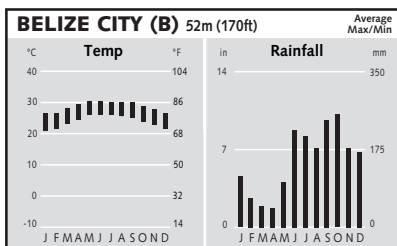
Central America is within the tropics, but there's a lot of variation in climate within this small region. The land rises from sea level to over 4000m, dividing the region into three primary temperature zones according to altitude, but there is little variation in temperature throughout the year.

In the lowlands (sea level to about 1000m) daytime temperatures range from 29°C to 32°C (84°F to 90°F), night-time temperatures from 21°C to 23°C (70°F to 74°F).

The temperate zone (from around 1000m to 2000m) has a pleasant climate, with daytime temperatures ranging from 23°C to 26°C (74°F to 79°F) and night-time temperatures from about 15°C to 21°C (59°F to 70°F).

The cold zone (above 2000m) has similar daytime temperatures to the temperate zone but is colder at night, around 10°C (50°F to 54°F). The very few areas over 4000m are characterized by an alpine climate.

The rainy season, which runs from around April to mid-December in most of Central America, is called *invierno* (winter). The rest of the year constitutes the dry season and is called *verano* (summer). Country Directories explain regional variations. The Caribbean side of Central America gets much more rainfall than the Pacific side – often more than twice as much.



CUSTOMS

All visitors leaving and entering a Central American country go through customs. Be prepared for quick bag checks at airports and land borders too. Most are just a quick gaze-and-poke, more of a formality than a search. But not always. Do not have any illegal drugs (or drug paraphernalia) on you. And it's wise to always be polite with officials and dress conservatively.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Travel in Central America poses a number of potential dangers that require caution, but don't be put off. Most areas are quite safe, and with sensible precautions you are unlikely to have any problems. For most travelers, the worst thing to happen is paying US\$1 more than expected to a cab driver, a few (dozen) mosquito or sand fly bites, and the inevitable bout or two of diarrhea. Specific warnings are

listed in country Directories and for applicable cities or towns throughout the guide.

The protracted civil wars in El Salvador, Nicaragua and Guatemala are over, but these dangers have been replaced by an alarming rise in the general crime rate and gang activity. Much doesn't involve foreign visitors, but there have been occasions of grab-and-run theft, assault, rape, car jacking and the occasional murder. Capital cities tend to have the highest rates of crime.

El Salvador's murder rate is rising. Towns such as Colón in Panama, are best avoided completely. Many sexual assaults occur on isolated beaches. Parts of Nicaragua's sparse north still have uncovered land mines from the 1980s conflict. Areas in Panama's Darién Province, which borders Colombia, are extremely dangerous because of guerrilla activity.

Avoid night buses anywhere (with the possible exception of Mexico), as highway robberies often happen at night.

The UK's **Foreign & Commonwealth Office** (FCO; www.fco.gov.uk/travel) lists excellent overviews on all countries on their website. Up-to-date 'travel warnings' are available from the **US Department of State** (www.travel.state.gov).

Will you run into trouble? No-one can say. Tens of thousands of foreign visitors enjoy the incomparable beauties of the region and the friendliness of its people every year, the huge majority without untoward incidents of any kind. But then there are the unlucky few or those who don't take precautions.

Ask, ask, ask for updates – from other travelers, tourist offices, police, guesthouse owners and Lonely Planet's **Thorn Tree** (<http://thorntree.lonelyplanet.com>).

Discrimination

In some Latin American countries, such as Mexico and Guatemala, the lighter one's skin tone, the higher the social status is perceived to be. In areas not inhabited by Afro-Caribbean cultures (which include the Garifuna villages in Belize, Honduras' Bay Islands and Panama's Bocas del Toro Archipelago), African-descendent travelers may encounter some discrimination (eg being refused entry into a nightclub, a stare, a flip remark).

It's sad to say it, but it can help to let locals know you're a foreign tourist (either by speaking English or saying so), thus presumably wealthy.

Asian travelers are less likely to face discrimination in Central America.

Drugs

Marijuana and cocaine are available in many places but illegal everywhere in the region, and penalties are severe. Avoid any conversation with someone who offers you drugs. If you are in an area where drug trafficking is prevalent, ignore it and do not show any interest whatsoever. Be aware that drugs are sometimes used to set up travelers for blackmail and bribery.

Roll-your-own cigarettes or cigarette papers may arouse suspicion.

Natural Hazards

Central America is prone to a wide variety of natural disasters, including earthquakes, hurricanes, floods and volcanic eruptions. General information about natural-disaster preparedness is available from the **US Federal Emergency Management Agency** (FEMA; www.fema.gov).

Police & Military

Corruption is a very serious problem among Latin American police, who are generally poorly paid and poorly supervised. In many countries, they are not reluctant to plant drugs on unsuspecting travelers or enforce minor regulations to the letter in the hope of extracting *coimas* (bribes).

If you are stopped by 'plainclothes policemen,' never get into a vehicle with them. Don't give them any documents or show them any money, and don't take them to your hotel. If the police appear to be the real thing, insist on going to a bona fide police station on foot.

The military often has considerable influence, even under civilian governments. Don't approach military installations, which may display warnings such as 'No stopping or photographs – the sentry will shoot.' Military checkpoints are frequent in places such as Chiapas and El Salvador. Most involve routine passport checks.

Robbery & Theft

No matter where you are, getting your gear stolen is a possibility, particularly in larger cities and transit points such as bus stations. Most theft is of the pickpocket or grab-and-run variety. As economic woes build up in Central America, these types of crimes will likely continue if not increase, and foreign tourists are

often singled out as they are presumed to be 'wealthy' and carrying valuables.

Be wary of food, drinks, sweets or cigarettes from strangers on buses, trains or in bars, as they could be laced with sedatives.

To protect yourself, take these common-sense precautions:

- Wear a money belt to keep a bigger stash of money or passport out of sight. Have small amounts of cash in your pockets; use pants with zip pockets.
- Any purse or bag in plain sight can be slashed or grabbed. Often two thieves work together, one cutting the strap, the other grabbing as you walk along the street.
- Be wary of anyone pointing out a spilled substance (mustard, dog feces) on your clothes. It's a classic ploy used by pick-pocket teams: one helps to clean the victim, the other robs them.
- Avoid taking night buses.
- Take taxis after dark, particularly in big cities. Don't wander alone down empty city streets or in isolated areas.
- When possible, keep most of your cash, traveler's checks and valuables (such as airline tickets or jewelry) sealed in a signed envelope in a hotel safe.
- Make sure your room lock works. And consider locking your (locked) backpack to something immovable in your room – such as bathroom pipes.
- Lock your room every time you leave it – even just for a quick bathroom visit down the hall.
- If you're staying in a room that has a dodgy lock (or none), such as a beach cabaña, try to keep your valuables in left luggage.
- Don't camp overnight on beaches or in the countryside unless you can be sure it's safe.
- Ask around for advice – guesthouse owners, tourist offices, other travelers.
- If you're being robbed, fork over whatever they want. Many thieves are armed. It's not worth resisting.

Go to the police after a robbery if you'll need a police statement to present to your insurance company. Otherwise, there's little point. In Spanish-speaking areas, say 'Yo quisiera poner una acta de un robo' (I'd like to report a robbery). You may have to write up the report yourself, then present it for an official stamp and signature.

Swimming Safety

Hundreds of people drown each year at Central America's beaches – about 150 to 200 drownings are recorded annually at Costa Rican beaches alone. Of these, 80% are caused by riptides – strong currents that pull the swimmer out to sea. They can occur even in waist-deep water. The best advice of all: ask about conditions before entering the water. If it's dangerous, don't tempt the ocean; show off on the dance floor instead.

DISABLED TRAVELERS

Latin America generally is not well equipped for disabled travelers, and services (such as phones, toilets, or anything in Braille) are rare to the point of nonexistence. Expensive international hotels are more likely to cater to guests with disabilities than cheap hotels; air travel or pre-arranged transportation will be more feasible than most local buses; off-the-beaten-track destinations will be less accessible than well-developed ones. Careful planning and communication is a must, though information isn't always easy to come by.

In the USA, **Mobility International** (☎ 541-343-1284; www.miusa.org; 132 E Broadway, Ste 343, Eugene, OR 97401) advises disabled travelers on mobility issues and offers educational programs. In the UK, there's the **Royal Association for Disability & Rehabilitation** (Radar; ☎ 020-7250 3222; www.radar.org.uk; 12 City Forum, 250 City Rd, London EC1V 8AF). In Australia and New Zealand, try the **National Information Communication Awareness Network** (Nican; ☎ 02-6241 1220; www.nican.com.au; 48 Brookes St, Unit 5, Mitchell ACT 2911, Australia).

Emerging Horizons (www.emerginghorizons.com) is a good magazine geared to disabled travelers.

Other websites for tips and links include the following:

www.access-able.com Includes links for hotels catering to disabled travelers.

www.disabledtravel.com Lots of tips, escorted trips in Costa Rica (look under Exotic Tours).

www.sath.org General tips for travelers with a range of different disabilities.

www.travelintalk.net Disabled travelers' group exchanges tips from road.

DISCOUNT CARDS

A Hostelling International (HI) membership card isn't terribly useful in Central America, except in Mexico and Costa Rica, where

some hostels offer minimal discounts to cardholders. Those going on to South America, however, may want to invest in the membership as they're more commonly accepted there (see www.iyhf.org for information).

Carriers of the International Student Identity Card (ISIC) can get very good discounts on travel insurance, as well as discounted air tickets. Check www.istc.org for more information.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

For embassy and consulate addresses and phone numbers, see individual country Directories. General embassy information can be found at www.embassyworld.com.

As a visitor in a Central American country, it's important to realize what your own country's embassy can and can't do. Generally speaking, it won't be much help in emergencies when you're even remotely at fault. Remember that you are bound by the laws of the country you are in.

Your embassy will not be sympathetic if you end up in jail after committing a crime locally, even if such actions are legal in your own country.

In genuine emergencies you may get some assistance but only if other channels have been exhausted. For example, if you have all your money and documents stolen, it might assist in getting a new passport but a loan for onward travel is out of the question.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

National holidays (*días feriados*) are taken seriously in Central America, and banks, public offices and many stores close. The big national holidays are dictated by the Roman Catholic Church calendar. Christmas and Semana Santa (Holy Week), the week leading up to Easter, are the most important. Panama hosts some of the most famous Carnival celebrations (February), and Mexico's *Día de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead), on November 2, is another huge celebration.

During events such as these, hotels are usually booked well in advance, especially in beach areas and in towns that have particularly elaborate celebrations, such as Antigua, Guatemala. Bus services may be limited or nonexistent on the Thursday afternoon and Friday leading into Easter, and many businesses are closed for the entire week preceding the holiday. In general, public transportation

tends to be tight on all holidays and the days immediately preceding or following them, so book tickets in advance.

See the country Directories for a more detailed listing of festivals, and see p12 for a list of some of the best.

GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELERS

On the whole, Central America is a pitifully unwelcoming place for gay men, and although lesbians have it a bit better, homosexuality is generally shunned in much of the region. In Nicaragua there is a statute criminalizing homosexual behavior, and although enforcement is inconsistent, harassment of gays does occur.

The absence of such laws does not prevent official and police harassment elsewhere, however; Guatemala and Panama are noted for being particularly homophobic, and in El Salvador a series of violent acts against gay men, lesbians and transgender people in recent years has drawn the attention of human-rights groups.

Misinformation about homosexuality in general, and AIDS in particular, has made Latin America that much more inhospitable for gay people.

In general, public displays of affection will not be tolerated, and gay men (and possibly women) could find themselves the target of verbal or physical abuse. Discretion is definitely the rule, especially in the countryside of Central America. Lesbians are generally less maligned than gay men, and women traveling together should encounter few, if any, problems.

Venues

There is usually at least one gay bar in big cities, which makes meeting people easier. Here's a rundown of some of the more in-the-open gay and lesbian scenes in Central America:

Mexico Cancún's bars and May festival; Playa del Carmen's clubs.

Guatemala Drag shows in Quetzaltenango; bars in Guatemala City.

El Salvador Gay scene around San Salvador's Blvd de los Héroes; mountain town San Vicente is gay friendly.

Costa Rica San José's thriving scene; beach hang-out at Manuel Antonio.

Panama Gay float at Carnival parade in Panama City.

Gay & Lesbian Travelers sections in country Directories offer more information.

Internet Resources

As well as websites listed in the country Directories, good gay/lesbian websites include:

www.thegully.com Online politically charged gay-zine with some Central America coverage.

www.gay.com Travel page with articles and info on Mexico, Guatemala, Panama and Costa Rica.

www.damron.com Publishes annual gay/lesbian guides, plus has database of gay sites on their site.

www.iglhrc Site for International Gay & Lesbian Human Rights Commission.

Additional information on gay and lesbian travel in Latin America can be found through the **International Gay & Lesbian Travel Association** (IGLTA; www.igltatour.com). Its website has information on group tours, and links to gay/lesbian-friendly hotels in Costa Rica and Mexico.

INSURANCE

A travel insurance policy covering theft, loss, accidents and illness is highly recommended. Some policies compensate travelers for misrouted or lost luggage. Also check that the coverage includes worst-case scenarios: ambulances, evacuations or an emergency flight home. Some policies specifically exclude 'dangerous activities,' which can include scuba diving, motorcycling or even trekking. Read the small print.

There are a wide variety of policies available; rates start at around US\$90 to US\$125 for the first month. **World Nomads** (www.worldnomads.com) offers good-deal policies, and policies handled by STA Travel and other student-travel organizations usually offer good value too. If a policy offers lower and higher medical-expense options, the low-expenses policy should be OK for Central America – medical costs are not nearly as high here as elsewhere.

If you have baggage insurance and need to make a claim, the insurance company may demand a receipt as proof that you bought the stuff in the first place. You must usually inform the insurance company by airmail and report the loss or theft to local police within 24 hours. Make a list of stolen items and their value. At the police station, you complete a *denuncia* (statement), a copy of which is given to you for your claim. The *denuncia* usually has to be made on *papel sellado* (stamped paper), which you can buy for pennies at a stationery.

For information on vehicle insurance, see p739. For information on health insurance, see p744.

INTERNET ACCESS

Internet cafés are available nearly everywhere except in the smallest towns. Rates are often under US\$1 per hour, rising to US\$8 per hour on touristy islands. A wi-fi boom is being felt in bigger cities – we list some places, often cafés, where you can bring your laptop for free access. See city and town Information sections for internet access points.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Honestly, Lonely Planet's discussion board **Thorn Tree** (<http://thorn.tree.lonelyplanet.com>) is the best way to get and share tips with fellow travelers before, during and after a trip. Check the Central America or Mexico pages. Lonely Planet's website also has brief country summaries.

Suggested websites appear in relevant sections throughout the book. Some general websites with information on Central America include the following:

CIA World Fact Book (www.odci.gov/cia/publications/factbook) Frequently updated background info on every country.

Latin American Network Information Center (<http://lanic.utexas.edu/subject/countries.html>) University of Texas site with oodles of Latin American links.

Latin World (www.latinworld.com) Loads of links, by country.

Planeta (www.planeta.com) Ecotourism online journal with articles and links on Central America, plus a free 93-page e-book on responsible travel.

Revue (www.revuemag.com) Free online English-language Guatemala mag with excellent Central America coverage.

South American Explorers (www.saexplorers.org) Handy if you're heading on to South America.

UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO; www.fco.gov.uk) British government site with travel advisories etc.

US State Department (www.state.gov/travel_warnings.html) Rather alarmist travel advisories and tips.

WHERE IT'S @

The cute little *arroba* (@) can be vexing to find on Latin American keyboards. Either cut and paste it from another email address or hold down the 'Alt' key and hit the '6' key, then the '4' key on the number pad (not at the top of the keyboard, and be sure 'Num Lock' is on). Or try 'Alt-Gr' (to the right of the space bar), then '2.' If that doesn't work, ask someone '¿Cómo se hace arroba?' – or send a postcard instead.

LEGAL MATTERS

Police officers in these countries are sometimes (if not often) part of the problem rather than the solution. The less you have to do with the law, the better.

Whatever you do, don't get involved in any way with illegal drugs: don't buy or sell, use or carry, or associate with people who do – even if the locals seem to do so freely. As a foreigner, you are at a disadvantage, and may be set up by others for bribes or arrest. Drug laws in all of these countries are strict, and though enforcement may be uneven, penalties are severe.

MAPS

The best map of the region is the fold-up color 1:1,100,000 *Traveller's Reference Map of Central America* (US\$10), produced by **International Travel Maps & Books** (ITMB; www.itmb.com) in Canada. ITMB also publishes separate maps covering each of the Central American countries and various regions of Mexico, as well as several maps of South America.

Other websites that deal with map sales include **Maplink** (www.maplink.com) and London-based **Stanfords** (www.stanfords.co.uk).

MONEY

Regular travelers go with a combination of cash and credit/bank cards, and possibly some traveler's checks. By far the most accepted currency is the US dollar, and two countries (El Salvador and Panama) use it as their own. Note that you'll want to use up local currencies, as they are often not accepted outside the region – or even outside the country!

For sample costs and average daily budgets, see Fast Facts on the title page of each country. For general tips on saving money, see p20.

ATMs

Bring an ATM (or debit) card. ATMs are available in most cities and large towns, and are almost always the most convenient, reliable, secure and economical way of getting cash.

The rate of exchange from ATMs is usually as good as, if not better than, any bank or legal moneychanger. Many ATMs are connected to the MasterCard/Cirrus or Visa/Plus network. If you rely on ATMs, bring two cards in case one is lost or stolen and keep an emergency phone number for your bank in a separate place. Some banks that issue ATM cards charge a fee for international transactions; check the policy before leaving home.

EMERGENCY BUCKS

It's worth always having a small amount of US dollars handy – enough to get a room, a meal, and a taxi, at least. This can be particularly useful when crossing the border – and perhaps overnighting in a border town that doesn't have an ATM. Central American currencies don't always fly in the next country and it can be hard finding anyone willing to change leftover quetzals – but generally it's possible to use US dollars. If you are arriving on a Sunday, when *casas de cambio* (currency exchange office) may be closed, you can be out of luck too.

Bargaining

The art of bargaining can be acquired through practice, and you'll get some in Central America's markets, particularly for souvenirs and craft goods. Most accommodation prices are fixed, but for long-term stays (or during low season) it's worth asking for a discount. Indoor shops (such as groceries) generally have fixed prices. You may need to negotiate a price with a taxi driver, but fares for buses are standardized. Always approach bargaining with patience and humor, and you'll often end up with a price agreeable to both you and the seller.

Black Market

The 'black market' (*mercado negro*) or *mercado paralelo* (parallel market) is generally limited to moneychangers at borders, who are known to slip in torn bills or short-change on occasion. On the plus side, they accept local currencies that banks elsewhere sometimes don't take. Consider only changing a small amount – and count your bills before handing over your money. Such unofficial exchange rates for the US dollar can be higher than official bank rates, which may be artificially high for political reasons.

Cash

It's a good idea to always have a small wad of US dollars tucked away because it can be exchanged practically anywhere. It's particularly useful when you've just crossed a border or when an ATM or exchange service for traveler's checks isn't available. Plan ahead before you head to remote areas; take more than enough cash.

Getting change for bigger notes in local currency is a daily concern. Notes worth even US\$2 to US\$5 can sometimes be difficult to change.

Credit Cards

A credit card can be handy in emergencies and it enables you to obtain cash or enjoy an unexpected luxury somewhere along the way. It can also be useful if you're asked to demonstrate 'sufficient funds' when entering a country.

American Express, Visa and MasterCard are the most widely accepted credit cards in Central America. Depending on the country, credit cards can often be used to withdraw cash at ATMs. Some credit-card websites have ATM locators that show which towns have this service.

Some travelers rely on cash advances to reduce the need for traveler's checks, but this isn't always possible (particularly in smaller towns). Always inquire about transaction charges for cash advances; in some countries you may be charged a fee in addition to that charged by the card company back home. Some card companies also charge a fee (usually around 2%) for international transactions.

The amount you actually pay your credit-card company will depend on the exchange rate. Consider pre-arranging monthly payments to your account if you're planning to be on the road for some time.

Keep your cards separate from your cash as well as emergency phone numbers for the companies. Hold onto your receipts so you can later double-check payments.

Exchanging Money

Change traveler's checks or foreign cash at a bank or a *casa de cambio* (currency exchange office). Rates are usually similar, but in general *casas de cambio* are quicker, less bureaucratic and open longer or have weekend hours. Street moneychangers, who may or may not be legal, will only handle cash. Sometimes you can also change money unofficially at hotels or in shops that sell imported goods (electronics dealers are an obvious choice). Big cities tend to offer better exchange rates. Some money-changing services are listed in Information sections in this guide. Compare exchange rates and commission fees before you commit.

Don't accept torn notes, as most locals won't when you try to use them.

International Transfers

If you're in a pinch, **Western Union** (www.westernunion.com) has offices in all Central American countries, and can arrange transfers. Generally it's cheapest to arrange through an agent, but it can also send money by phone or the internet. Fees vary from a US\$10 set fee to 8% of the balance.

Bank money transfers are possible, but take longer and can run into complications. Ask for a cable transfer (not a mail draft); you'll need to provide a local bank's branch information.

Tipping

Diners are generally expected to tip about 10% at restaurants. Some restaurants add a service charge of 10% to 20% to the bill; ask (*¿La cuenta incluye el servicio?*).

A small tip for taxi drivers or for the cleaning staff at your hotel is not necessary, but is appreciated.

Traveler's Checks

Fewer people are carrying them, but traveler's checks from companies such as American Express, Visa, Thomas Cook and Citibank, which offer replacement in case of loss or theft, remain the safest way to carry money. Don't use those issued by smaller banks. To facilitate replacement in case of theft, keep a record of check numbers and the original bill of sale in a safe place.

In some countries, traveler's checks are more difficult to cash, however, and banks and *casas de cambio* charge high commissions. Note if there's a fixed transaction fee (regardless of the value of the checks) or a percentage fee (usually 1% to 3%); if the fee is fixed, consider cashing larger amounts.

PASSPORT

You need one. Make sure yours is valid for six months beyond the projected end of your trip and has plenty of blank pages for stamp-happy officials. Keep a photocopy of the passport and visa separate from the real thing. It's not a bad idea to carry the copy when walking around town, leaving the passport at your hotel.

PHOTOGRAPHY

Most internet cafés allow you to burn your digital-camera shots onto a blank CD.

If you're still in the 35mm world, film is widely available throughout the region. If you

want slide or black-and-white film, you're best advised to bring your own. Developing your film in Central America saves anxieties over putting film through airport X-rays (which shouldn't affect your film), but it is relatively expensive, and sometimes not terrific quality. Avoid mailing unprocessed film back, as that goes through more powerful X-rays.

Generally remember those beach or ruin shots get bleached out in midday sun. Try to photograph when natural light is at its softest, in the early morning or late afternoon. Film speeds are more than just packaging gimmicks. ISO 100 is best for outdoor shots on bright days; ISO 200 is a good all-around speed for varying conditions; ISO 400 is best for night or dim-light situations. An ultraviolet (UV) filter or polarizing filter can help avoid washed-out results. For more tips, get Lonely Planet's *Travel Photography: A Guide to Taking Better Pictures*.

Always ask before photographing individuals, particularly indigenous people. In some places, indigenous people may take offence at being photographed; elsewhere they may ask for a small payment. Indigenous people may also take offence if you photograph images of saints in their local church.

Taking photographs of military installations or security-sensitive places, such as military checkpoints in Chiapas and El Salvador, is very unwise (and probably illegal).

Note that some tourist sites charge an additional fee for tourists with cameras. Others charge fees only for use of video cameras.

POST

The quality of the postal service in the region varies and can be a very uncertain business. Letters airmailed to Europe and North America typically take 14 days, sometimes longer. Generally, important mail and parcels should be sent by registered or certified service, and if you want something to arrive within a reasonable amount of time, be sure to specify airmail (*correo aéreo* or *por avión*). Sending parcels can be awkward, as often a customs officer must inspect the contents before a postal clerk can accept them. Note that the place for posting overseas parcels is sometimes different from the main post office. UPS, FedEx, DHL and other shipping and private courier services are available in some countries, providing an efficient but expensive alternative.

The simplest way of receiving mail is to have letters sent to you *poste restante*, (general delivery; known in Latin America as *lista de correos*), to all of Central America except Guatemala. Address as follows:

Jane SMITH (last name in capitals)
Lista de Correos
Cozumel
Quintana Roo 77609 (post code)
MEXICO

A post-office box is known as an *apartado* (abbreviated to 'Ap' or 'Apto') or a *casilla de correos* ('Casilla' or 'CC').

Note that mail theft can happen. This is primarily a problem with mail sent from the USA to points in Central America, presumably because many Central Americans live and work in the USA and send money home to their families. Postcards make it through more easily.

See Post in the country Directories for country-specific information.

STUDYING

One of Central America's greatest attractions is the language schools. As part of a trip to Central America, studying Spanish (or an indigenous language such as Quiché) is a terrific way to absorb local culture, give a sense of purpose in a secondary town most travelers blaze through, and actually learn something. Schools often work to help the disadvantaged in their communities. Many schools are excellent, and prices throughout the region are cheaper than in Mexico. Outside Mexico it's generally possible to study for four hours a day with a private experienced teacher and stay and eat with a local family for around US\$220 per week.

Antigua, Guatemala (p108) is by far the most celebrated language-school haven, with several dozen schools catering to the buzzing travelers' scene.

Quetzaltenango, Guatemala (p140) – big enough to maintain interest for weeks, but far from the main travel circuit – and Estelí, Nicaragua (p476), are a couple of Central America's best places to get serious. It's certainly feasible to study-hop your way around the region – if you don't know Spanish yet, you can before you get to Panama!

It may be possible to show up at a school on Monday morning to start that week. It's preferable, though, to plan ahead by phone or

email. Many schools require some sort of one-time registration fee; ask if they'll waive it – often they will. Levels of teaching experience (and engagement) vary wildly. If you're not happy, say so. Most schools are accommodating and will switch teachers.

You can also book courses in the region with an outside organization such as **AmeriSpan** (www.amerispan.com). These courses are generally excellent but cost about twice the price as one booked locally. **ICAD** (www.icadstr.com) combine responsible travel with their year-long immersion courses in Costa Rica. It's about US\$1700 for the year, plus US\$400 to US\$600 monthly expenses.

Do try to stay with a family – it can offer a fascinating glimpse into local life not seen from the hostel. You'll witness such phenomena as the 'Latin bed' (the whole family sleeping in one room – don't worry, you'll get a private room) and the fluid family count, as new cousins suddenly pop up for a few days then leave as unexpectedly.

See individual country Directories for more study information.

TELEPHONE

Prepaid phone cards, available for national telecommunications systems in each country, allow local and long-distance (and international in some countries, such as Costa Rica and Mexico) calls, with 'units' of time displayed on public pay phones. These are bought from newsstands and shops at pre-set denominations.

Local, long-distance and international phone and fax services are available at centralized telephone offices in every city and town. Avoid credit-card phones in Mexico, and the black 'press button' phones in Guatemala, which charge extortionate rates.

Often a far cheaper alternative is using on-line phone services from internet cafés, where international rates start at US\$0.15 per minute to the USA, US\$0.25 to Europe.

Note that it is not possible to make collect (reverse-charge) calls to a number of countries from Central America – collect calls will only be accepted in countries having reciprocal agreements with the country from which you are calling; check with the telephone office. You can usually place them to the USA. It is sometimes cheaper to make a collect or credit-card call to Europe or North America than to pay for the call where you are. Often

the best way is to make a quick international call and have the other party call you back (some telephone offices allow this).

Direct lines abroad, accessed via special numbers and billed to an account at home, have made international calls much simpler. There are different access numbers for each telephone company in each country – get a list from your phone company before you leave home.

Cell (mobile) phones are in wide use around Central America's bigger towns and cities, but using one can be quite expensive. Prepaid SIM cards are available. Central America doesn't subscribe to a consistent system. El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras use the GSM 1900/850 (like the USA); Belize, Mexico and Nicaragua the GSM 1900; Costa Rica GSM 1800 and Panama GSM 850 (like the UK's GSM 1800/850 system). It's sometimes possible to rent cell phones; cheapies cost about US\$25.

See also individual country Directories for country-specific details.

TOILETS

The toilets of Central America are fine, it's just the plumbing that has issues. Nowhere in the region should you deposit toilet paper or anything else in the toilet unless a sign specifies that it's OK to do so. Wastebaskets are generally provided for that purpose.

Some public toilets have attendants who charge a small fee (US\$0.10 or so) and provide paper. It's a good idea to keep a spare roll of toilet paper handy.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Travelers will find a tourist office in the capital city of each country; some countries have them in outlying towns as well. If you're a student, look for student travel agencies in the capital cities of Costa Rica and Panama, and Cancún, Mexico.

Check www.visitcentroamerica.com (in Spanish only), with standard tourist-board coverage of all countries.

South American Explorers (www.saexplorers.org) is a helpful membership-based organization with information for travel in Latin American, particularly South America. It has traveler clubhouses in Lima, Cuzco, Quito and Buenos Aires; its **US office** (☎ 607-277-0488; 126 Indian Creek Rd, Ithaca, NY 14850) publishes the quarterly magazine, *South American Explorer*.

VISAS & DOCUMENTS Visas

Presently citizens of the USA, EU, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and many other nations can arrive in all Central American countries (including Mexico) without arranging a visa beforehand. Check ahead from your country before planning your trip, as this may change.

Many countries charge an entry or tourist fee upon arrival – from US\$5 to US\$20. Check country Directory sections for country-specific visa information, as well as the Transportation sections in country chapters for departure tax fees.

Note that if you need a visa for a certain country and arrive at a land border without one, you will probably have to return to the nearest town that has a consulate and obtain a visa. Airlines will not normally let you board a plane for a country for which you don't have the necessary visa. Also, a visa in itself may not guarantee entry: in rare cases, you may still be turned back at the border if you don't have 'sufficient funds' or an onward or return ticket.

Sufficient Funds & Onward Tickets

Checking passports is a routine procedure upon arriving a country, but some officials may ask verbally or on the application form, about your financial resources. If you lack 'sufficient funds' for your proposed visit, officials may limit the length of your stay. (US\$500 per month of your planned stay is generally considered sufficient; traveler's checks, and sometimes a credit card, should qualify toward the total amount.)

Several Central American countries require you to have a ticket out of the country (see p737).

Visa Extensions

Once you are inside a country, you can always apply for an extension at the country's immigration office. Usually there is a limit to how many extensions you can receive; if you leave the country and re-enter, your time starts over again. See individual country's Directory sections for more on this.

VOLUNTEERING

Considering that well over half the population of countries such as Nicaragua and Guatemala live in poverty, volunteering can both

VIVA EL CA-4!

Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and Nicaragua's 'CA-4 Border Control' agreement allows free travel for up to 90 days between this subregion for citizens of the four countries and many foreign nationalities (including residents of the USA, Canada, the UK and Australia). On paper, at least, you should only have to pay a tourist fee once to enter these four countries. The catch is that many border patrols try to sneak in a few dollars (for 'paperwork') when crossing borders. It's not true. If they ask, politely remind them of the 'CA-4.'

make a trip more meaningful and help out the region you visit. On offer are programs to teach those who can't afford classes, help build homes, work to preserve the environment, or help out at hill town medical clinics. Many who volunteer end up staying on longer than expected and find it to be the best part of a bigger trip. Volunteers – sometimes working alone, seven days a week – usually work hard. Note that studying Spanish at schools that pool profits to help communities is another way of contributing (see p731).

You can find volunteering organizations once in Central America (cheaper), or arrange programs with international organizations before your trip. Be aware that some organizations seek a minimum-period commitment, and may prefer that you organize your visit before turning up at the doorstep.

For more information on volunteering, get a copy of Lonely Planet's *Volunteer*.

International Organizations

Many international organizations will help you peg a program to match job/school requirements, and get college credit for it. Nearly all programs cost money – usually a bit more than you'd pay on a trip. Some volunteers find sponsors – at school or privately – to fund a program. Spanish is not mandatory for all. Often programs begin with a few weeks of Spanish classes, as part of the on-location transition. A sample three-month program to Guatemala, for example, including four weeks of Spanish study, runs at about US\$2500 (not including the airfare). Costa Rica has the most opportunities (such as in Monteverde), and Guatemala and Mexico have many too.

VOLUNTEERING HIGHLIGHTS

These stand out as easy and rewarding options that can be arranged by local organizations, often during your trip.

- Teach English to Maya children outside Quetzaltenango, Guatemala (p141)
- Help monitor sea turtle nests in Costa Rica (p631).
- Learn organic farming by volunteering (at US\$15 per day, including room and board) at a sustainable agriculture ranch in Costa Rica (p613)
- Provide English courses at Cumaro, El Salvador (p315)
- Work with wildlife-related conservation projects in El Petén, Guatemala (p189)

Travel agencies such as **STA Travel** (www.sta-travel.com) can arrange volunteering projects. A couple of other organizations that offer a variety of programs to Latin America include the following. Prices don't include transportation to the region unless otherwise noted.

AmeriSpan (in the USA ☎ 800-879 6640, 215-751 1100; in the UK ☎ 020-8123 6086; www.amerispan.com) Sends volunteers to Costa Rica, Guatemala and the Yucatán on varied programs – building homes, teaching children, working with animals. Guatemala's programs are the cheapest – from US\$900 for six weeks (including two weeks' Spanish study and homestay).

Amigos de las Américas (www.amigoslink.org) Youth-oriented summer programs – costing about US\$3850 (including flight to/from USA) – ranging from national-park work to community development in Honduras, Costa Rica and Mexico.

Habitat for Humanity (www.habitat.org) Generally is more about funding than on-field programs, though it listed several options in Costa Rica at research time.

Idealist.org (www.idealist.org) Hundreds of links for volunteering opportunities around the world.

i-to-i (www.i-to-i.com) Has UK, US and Ireland offices; four- to 24-week volunteer and study programs to Guatemala, Honduras, Costa Rica and Mexico, with no language requirement. Prices range from US\$1000 to US\$3000, including a homestay and most meals.

International Volunteer Programs Association (www.volunteerinternational.org) Lists many programs in Latin America, most from US\$900 for a couple weeks.

ResponsibleTravel (www.responsibletravel.com) UK-based ecofriendly tour operator with many volunteer trips.

Transition Abroad (www.transitionabroad.com) Heaps of volunteer links; look under Central America – working at Nicaragua's Miraflores Nature Preserve for US\$30 per week sounds like a winner.

Organizations in Central America

There are many smaller, privately run volunteer organizations in Central America, and it's not difficult to find short-term (one or two weeks) or longer programs once you're on the road. This will save you the higher costs of pre-arranging a program, but it isn't always easy to find them. We've tried to help by listing volunteer programs as we found them. Start by looking at the individual country Directories for more volunteering options.

WOMEN TRAVELERS

Women traveling solo through Central America typically find that popular perceptions over-estimate the dangers faced. Take all the normal precautions you would elsewhere in new territory or big cities. The biggest adjustment is getting used to a very vocal male population who hoot, hiss and whistle. Ignore this behavior and most of the time you will be simply left alone. Certain bars and soccer games tend to be testosterone territory and your incursion will invite attention.

Dress according to local norms to avoid unwanted attention (often this means wearing long skirts or pants instead of shorts). Match locals' formality in dress because disheveled clothing can be a sign of disrespect. Being gracious and behaving somewhat formal will win you allies. Talk to locals to find out which areas to avoid. Locals, particularly families, will often go out of their way to help a single female traveler.

Though there's no need to be paranoid, women travelers should be aware that sexual assault, rape and mugging incidents do occur. The greatest risk is in remote or dark areas, on lone stretches of beach, or sometimes to women trekking. Always keep enough money for a taxi ride to your accommodation – it's not wise to be walking after dark.

In general, Central American police are not likely to be very helpful in rape cases. The tourist police may be more sympathetic, but it's possibly better to contact your embassy and see a doctor.

JourneyWoman (www.journeywoman.com) is a useful online source for female travelers with lots of tips and advice.

WORKING

According to law you must have a permit to work in any of the countries covered in this guide. In practice you may get paid under the table or through some bureaucratic loophole, if you can find suitable work. Many travelers work short-term jobs – through that aforementioned loophole – in restaurants, hostels or bars geared to international travelers for survival wages. Before taking such a job, consider volunteering instead (see p733), as many of these jobs could just as well be performed by locals.

Teaching English is another option. Consult the classified advertisements in local newspapers (both English- and Spanish-language papers), browse the bulletin boards in spots where foreigners gather and ask around. Big

cities offer the best possibilities for schools or private tutoring. Generally it doesn't involve big money, but often you could trade classes for room and board. If you do teach, teach well. Even small fees can be big sacrifices for locals trying to learn a language to better their chances in school or work. It's not as easy as it looks. Many schools will require Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) teaching certificates.

Some international organizations help place individuals in various work jobs, including organizations such as CIEE and i-to-i (see p733).

Transitions Abroad (www.transitionsabroad.com) is an excellent bimonthly magazine highlighting work and study abroad options. The website has many useful links.

Transportation

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GETTING THERE & AWAY

Most visitors reach Central America by air or overland from Mexico. Flights, tours and rail tickets can be booked online at www.lonelyplanet.com/travel_services.

AIR

All Central American countries have international airports. The major ones are Cancún, Mexico (airport code CUN); Guatemala City, Guatemala (GUA); Belize City, Belize (BZE); San Salvador, El Salvador (SAL); San Pedro Sula (SAP) and Tegucigalpa (TGU), Honduras; Managua, Nicaragua (MGA); San José, Costa Rica (SJO); and Panama City, Panama (PAC). A limited number of international flights also reach Flores, Guatemala (FRS); Roatán, Honduras (RTB); and David,

THINGS CHANGE...

The information in this chapter is particularly vulnerable to change. Check directly with the airline or a travel agent to make sure you understand how a fare (and ticket you may buy) works and be aware of the security requirements for international travel. Shop carefully. The details in this chapter should be regarded as pointers and are not a substitute for your own careful, up-to-date research.

Panama (DAV). Other than South American flights, nearly all go via US gateways (particularly Houston, Miami or New York's JFK) or Mexico City.

Airlines

Central America's national airlines have frequent connections to North and South America. Four of the national airlines have combined forces as San Salvador-based **Grupo TACA** (code TA; www.taca.com), comprising TACA (El Salvador), Aviateca (Guatemala), Lacs (Costa Rica), and Nica (Nicaragua). The website also lists office addresses worldwide. In the USA you can reach them toll free at ☎ 800 400-8222 and in Canada ☎ 800 722-8222; in the UK call ☎ 8702-410 340, in Australia ☎ 02-8248 0020.

Panama's **COPA** (code CM; www.copaair.com) connects Panama with Los Angeles, Mexico City, Miami, New York and many South American cities.

Following are other airlines with frequent service to Central America.

Aeroméxico (code AM; www.aeromexico.com) To Cancún from many US cities and Madrid.

American Airlines (AA; www.americanairlines.com) All of Central America from Dallas and Miami.

Avianca (AV; www.avianca.com) Flights between Panama City and Bogotá, Columbia.

British Airways (BA; www.britishairways.com) Flights to Belize City, Guatemala City, San José and Panama City via Miami.

Continental Airlines (CO; www.continental.com) All of Central America from Newark and Houston.

Delta Airlines (DL; www.delta.com) Flights to Central America from Atlanta and Los Angeles.

Jet Blue (B6; www.jetblue.com) Connects Boston and New York with Cancún.

Lloyd Aéreo Boliviano (LB; www.labajairlines.com.bo) To Panama City from Havana, Miami and Santa Cruz, Bolivia.

Mexicana (MX; www.mexicana.com) To Cancún, Guatemala City, San Salvador, San José and Panama City and Tuxtla Gutierrez, Mexico, via Mexico City.

United Airlines (UA; www.united.com) Reaches several Central American cities.

US Airways (US; www.usairways.com) Goes to Guatemala City, San José, Cancún from Charlotte, Las Vegas, Phoenix and Philadelphia.

Tickets

Central America's slender isthmus shape makes 'open jaw' tickets – flying into one place (say Cancún or Guatemala City) and out another (Panama City) – an attractive option, and the good news is that it's often not much more expensive than a round-trip ticket. If you're flexible on where you start and end, shop around – discount fares come and go.

You might think going to a hub city – such as San Salvador on TACA – would save money, but sometimes it's *more* expensive; we found some tickets through San Salvador to Belize City from Los Angeles, for example, to be cheaper than return tickets to San Salvador. The reason – in the confusing world of airline ticket pricing – is airlines trying to compete with more direct options. Again, shop around.

Typically Panama City is more expensive to reach from the US gateways than Guatemala City, but otherwise no Central American city is consistently cheaper than another.

High-season rates (generally July and August, Christmas to New Year's, and around Semana Santa) can be US\$100 to US\$250 more expensive.

Student travel agencies such as **STA Travel** (www.statravel.com) offer student discounts for those under 26.

If you're flying from Europe or Australia, chances are you can get a free stopover in a US gateway city such as Los Angeles or Miami.

See Air in individual country Transportation sections for the departure taxes

collected when leaving from Central American airports.

AIR PASSES & RTW TICKETS

Air passes that include flights into Central America have faded out in recent years; TACA and COPA's Copass no longer exist.

Round-the-world (RTW) ticket options are an option if coming from the USA or Europe, but lack of flight connections between Australasia and Central America have all but put Latin America off RTW ticket options from that part of the world.

COURIER FLIGHTS

Sadly, the salad days of dirt-cheap courier flights have wilted after September 11, 2001. Get more information from the following: **www.courier.org** US\$45 per year subscription. **www.couriertravel.org** US\$40 one-time fee; New York–Cancún flight.

From Australia & New Zealand

No direct flights to Central America from Australia or New Zealand exist. (Sydney and Auckland do have services via Argentina and Chile.) The cheapest option to Central America is through the USA, usually Los Angeles or Miami. It is often considerably cheaper to get two individual tickets – one to the USA, another to Central America.

Two of the best travel agents specializing in cheap airfares are **STA Travel** (☎ 1300 733-035, 03-9207-5900; www.statravel.com.au) and **Flight**

ONWARD-TICKET REQUIREMENTS

If you're planning on flying into one country and back from another, note that increasingly immigration officials require travelers show proof of onward or continuing travel. We talked with the embassies, and heard, for example, from Panama's 'yes, it's necessary,' which quickly softened to 'well, we don't want to say it's OK in case you have problems.' The restriction is there mainly to ensure nonresidents don't stay long-term in the country without permission.

Showing 'continuing travel' from another country (say a flight home from another country) and explaining how you'll get there is almost always enough. Overwhelmingly most travelers are never asked; as one travel agent summed up, 'It's rarely a problem, but it's up to the mood of the person checking your passport and whether their supervisor is watching or not.'

It's a good idea to ask the airlines – as they can be fined for bringing in a passenger without proper documentation. Also it may be worth showing a print-out of a 'bus reservation' out of the country, emailed from a local travel agency listed throughout the book.

This requirement also pops up at land borders on occasion. Crossing into Costa Rica, for instance, it's sometimes necessary to purchase a bus ticket at the border leaving Costa Rica – even if you don't plan to use it. If you enter by private car, no onward ticket is required obviously, but proper documentation for the car is needed.

If you're continuing on to South America, check beforehand for similar restrictions in those countries.

Centre (☎ 133 133; www.flightcentre.com.au). Both have many offices nationwide.

For discount tickets in New Zealand, try **STA Travel** (☎ 0800 474 400; www.statravel.co.nz) or **Flight Centre** (☎ 0800 243 544; www.flightcentre.co.nz). Both have offices in Auckland and other cities.

For online fares try www.travel.com.au or www.zuji.com from Australia, and www.goholidays.co.nz or www.zuji.co.nz from New Zealand.

From Continental Europe

The best deals are often found at 'student' travel agencies (nonstudents are welcome too) in Amsterdam, Brussels, Paris, Berlin and Frankfurt, and sometimes Athens. Alternatively you can try booking via a London agent.

In Paris, student/discount travel agencies include **Nouvelles Frontières** (☎ 08 25 00 07 47; www.nouvelles-frontieres.fr), with nationwide offices, including services in Belgium. Another is **Havas Voyages** (☎ 01 48 51 86 19; www.havasvoyages.fr).

In the Netherlands, the official student agency **NBBS Reizen** (☎ 0900-10 20 300; www.nbbs.nl) is good.

STA Travel (www.statravel.com) has offices throughout Germany and in Austria, Denmark, Finland, Sweden and Switzerland.

From South America

Grupo TACA and COPA airlines connect Central American cities to and from Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Chile and Argentina. Some US airlines, such as American Airlines, have a few connections too.

If you're planning to visit Central America and South America on a trip, note that TACA (and other airlines) often allow a free stop-over (in San José for TACA), meaning you can visit Central America for no extra charge. Brazilian discount airline **Gol** (www.voegol.com.br) may offer Central American services at some point.

Panama City is generally the cheapest link to and from South America with Colombia, Ecuador and Venezuela, unsurprisingly, offering the least-expensive deals.

Note that many South American countries require onward air tickets upon arrival (see p737).

Helpful travel agencies and services in South America include the following:

South American Explorers Lima (☎ 01-445-3306; www.saexplorers.org; Calle Piura 135, Miraflores) Quito (☎ 02-222-5228; quitoclub@saexplorers.org; Apt 17-21-431, Eloy Alfaro)
Trotamundos (☎ 1-599-6413; www.trotamundos.com; Diagonal 35 No 5-73; ☎ 1-341-8986; Carrera 6, No 14-43, Bogotá, Colombia)

From the UK

No flights link the UK directly with Central America. British Airways has weekly flights direct to Mexico City, which run at about £150 to £180 less than Central American fares. Otherwise it's possible to reach any Central American country in a day via the USA (where it's necessary to clear customs, even if you're only making a connection). It's possible to get free stopovers in US cities such as Houston or New York on Continental Airlines, or Atlanta, Cincinnati, Los Angeles or San Francisco on Delta Airlines. British Airways and Iberia often go via Miami.

Book way ahead if you're planning to go from mid-December through January, or July through mid-September.

If planning on globe-trotting, ask about discounted one-way tickets through Central and South America. Check the weekend editions of national newspapers for airfare listings.

For student discounts, **STA Travel** (☎ 0871-230 0040; www.statravel.co.uk) has offices throughout the UK.

An excellent travel agency geared toward trips in the region is **Journey Latin America** (☎ 020-874 7108; www.journeylatinamerica.co.uk), with offices in London and Manchester.

South American Experience (☎ 0870-499 0683; www.southamericanexperience.co.uk) has discounted fares to Belize City, Guatemala City and San José, plus plenty of region-wide information on its website.

Bucket shops selling discounted fares abound in London and in the UK. Check for travel agents that are bonded by organizations (such as ATOL, ABTA or AITO) that give some protection to ticket buyers if the company goes broke.

From the USA & Canada

Most flights from the USA and Canada go through Dallas/Fort Worth, Houston, Los Angeles or Miami. Other major gateways are Atlanta, Chicago, Newark, New York, San Francisco, Charlotte, Toronto and Washington, DC.

Tickets bought here usually have restrictions, including a two-week advance-purchase requirement. Often prices rise if you stay over three or four months.

Travel agencies known as 'consolidators' have some of the best deals; they buy tickets in bulk, then sell at discounts.

A couple of excellent Latin American-focused agencies are worth contacting, even if you're not in their immediate area: the Colorado-based **Exitto Travel** (☎ 800 655-4053, 925-952 9322; www.exittotravel.com) and San Francisco-based **Americas Travel** (☎ 888-703-9955, 415-703 9955; www.americatravel.net).

The USA's largest student travel agency is **STA Travel** (☎ 800 781-4040; www.statravel.com), with nationwide offices and cheaper prices for students. Booking tours and tickets, the **Adventure Travel Company** (in USA or Canada ☎ 888-238-2887; www.atcadventure.com) has offices in the USA and Canada.

A few online ticket services include www.cheaptickets.com, www.expedia.com and www.travelocity.com. You can try bidding for a cheaper one at www.priceline.com or www.skyauction.com.

LAND

For details on border crossings between Central American nations and also country-specific requirements, see Transportation sections and the border crossing boxed texts in each country chapter. For general advice on crossing borders, see p741.

From Mexico

BUS & BOAT

It's possible to bus from the USA or Canada into Mexico and directly into Central America. The three most convenient land borders between Mexico and Central America are at the Chetumal-Corozal (Belize) border in Quintana Roo (Yucatán Peninsula; see p56); Ciudad Cuauhtémoc-La Mesilla (Guatemala) in Chiapas (see p69); and Ciudad Hidalgo-Ciudad Tecún Umán (Guatemala; see p153) in Chiapas state (about 38km to the south of Tapachula).

Another popular border crossing is by boat across the Río Usumacinta at the Frontera Corozal-Bethel (Guatemala) border, south of Palenque (see p249).

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Most people driving to Central America do so from the USA (or Canada). Buying a car in the region (including Mexico) is very complicated. If you drive, you will *not* save money, but it can make for a great trip. But there are a lot of fees, paperwork, red tape, tolls and parking worries involved. You'll need to be prepared to stop for passport checks at

CLIMATE CHANGE & TRAVEL

Climate change is a serious threat to the ecosystems that humans rely upon, and air travel is the fastest-growing contributor to the problem. Lonely Planet regards travel, overall, as a global benefit, but believes we all have a responsibility to limit our personal impact on global warming.

Flying & Climate Change

Pretty much every form of motor travel generates CO₂ (the main cause of human-induced climate change) but planes are far and away the worst offenders, not just because of the sheer distances they allow us to travel, but because they release greenhouse gases high into the atmosphere. The statistics are frightening: two people taking a return flight between Europe and the US will contribute as much to climate change as an average household's gas and electricity consumption over a whole year.

Carbon Offset Schemes

Climatecare.org and other websites use 'carbon calculators' that allow jetsetters to offset the greenhouse gases they are responsible for with contributions to energy-saving projects and other climate-friendly initiatives in the developing world – including projects in India, Honduras, Kazakhstan and Uganda.

Lonely Planet, together with Rough Guides and other concerned partners in the travel industry, supports the carbon offset scheme run by climatecare.org. Lonely Planet offsets all of its staff and author travel.

For more information check out our website: lonelyplanet.com.

DEPARTURE TAXES

Air taxes in countries vary. Costa Rica and Panama have the smallest taxes (5%), while Guatemala and El Salvador have a 20% tax jacking up airfares. These taxes are generally included in fares quoted by travel agents (but not when booking online), both abroad and in Central America. Departure taxes are covered in the Transportation sections of individual country chapters.

military checkpoints. Also, highway robberies aren't unknown. Avoid driving at night.

Note that you'll need liability insurance that covers Mexico and Central America – your policy back home isn't recognized here. It's available at many border towns. Texas-based **Sanborn's Insurance** (☎ 800-222-0158; www.sanbornsinsurance.com) sells separate coverage (only) for Mexico and Central America. A two-week liability/full coverage policy in Mexico is US\$125/183; in Central America, sadly, coverage doesn't include Belize or Nicaragua. Monthly rates for liability/full coverage are US\$186/386. It's possible to get a policy by phone or online – so you can get Mexico coverage on the road in Central America for your return through Mexico.

A few other pretrip considerations:

- You need a valid driver's license from your home country.
- Unleaded petrol is now available throughout Central America.
- Be sure that the shock absorbers and suspension are in good shape for the bumpy roads.
- A spare fuel filter, and other spare parts, could be invaluable.
- Check with a national tourist board or consulate on any changes of bringing a car into Mexico, or Central America, before showing up in your vehicle.

From South America

There are no road connections between South America and Central America (via Panama), and guerrilla activity in Colombia (plus the difficulty of travel) have essentially made the trip over the Darién Gap on foot an impossibility.

In the past travelers have made the trip, with the help of local guides.

SEA

Unless you're a filthy-rich yachtie or on a cruise ship, options for boat travel heading to/from the region are very limited and very expensive. The most plausible way is going on a chartered sailboat from the San Blas Archipelago, Panama, to Cartagena, Colombia – a US\$275 (or so), five-day trip (with a few days spent on the islands and two days' transit to/from Colombia). Note that smuggling is common on the Colón–Cartagena cargo route. See p707 for more on this.

In Cartagena, check with the hostel **Casa Viena** (☎ 05-664 6242; www.casaviena.com; Calle San Andrés 30-53, Getsemani) for schedule info. The manager there told us they hadn't heard of any travelers making the trip by cargo since around 2001, and that two cargo boats had actually sunk in recent years.

GETTING AROUND

Like buses? Buses are the cheapest and most accessible way to get around Central America, particularly along the Pan-American Hwy (sometimes called the Pan-Americana or Interamericana – we've alternated usage based on local parlance), which runs through all the countries but Belize.

Because of the region's skinny stature, a flight can save several hours of backtracking. Islands and some borders are served by various types of boat. See p14 for suggested itineraries.

AIR

Many flights connect the region by some international carriers as well as the national airlines; see p736 for listings. Some smaller domestic airlines provide service too; see country chapters for more information. Occasionally it will be necessary to change planes in the carrier's hub city (a Managua–Panama City flight may change planes up north in San Salvador).

Prices are an obstacle. Despite relatively short distances, individual one-way and round-trip tickets within Central America (either bought abroad or in the region) can be very expensive. Note that if you fly to Central America on TACA, they sometimes sell regional flights – generally to or from San José – at a discount. Not infrequently, one-way tickets run just a few dollars less than a round-trip ticket.

Flights can sometimes be overbooked; reconfirm yours before arriving at the airport. See Onward-Ticket Requirements (p737) for potential problems with entering one country and flying out of another.

Air Passes

Air passes are 'de-evolving,' to quote one travel agent. They didn't offer much better deals than you'd get buying an individual ticket or two anyway. Ask a local agent about passes, as things may change.

Sample Fares

What you're about to see borders on sacrilege. Airfares can vary wildly – depending on the length of stay, time of year and special promotions – so treat these high-season fares as a rough gauge only in identifying potential routes.

Note that San Salvador and San José are the most popular hubs – promotional flights between them are sometimes as low as US\$139 return. Occasionally a promotional return flight may be even cheaper than a one-way fare.

Here are some sample fares:

Origin	Destination	One-way	Round-trip
Cancún	Flores	US\$199	US\$279
Guatemala City	Panama City	US\$259	US\$429
Guatemala City	San José	US\$199	US\$299
Managua	Guatemala City	US\$264	US\$229(!)
Managua	Panama City	US\$259	US\$414

Worthwhile domestic flights include Managua to Corn Islands (about US\$164 return), which saves a two-day bus/boat trip each way (about US\$50 return).

BICYCLE

Long-distance cycling can be dangerous, as few drivers are accustomed to sharing narrow streets in cities or (often) shoulderless two-lane highways with bicycles. That said, cycling is on an upswing – with mountain rides and coffee plantation tours (including guide and bike) available all over Central America.

You can rent bicycles in several cities and travelers hang-outs, such as San Cristóbal de Las Casas (Mexico), Flores (Guatemala), Granada (Nicaragua) and Panama City. There are many mountain-bike tours available (notably in cooler locales such as Guatemala's highlands and San Cristóbal de Las Casas). Consider

HINTS FOR BORDER CROSSINGS

Going from one of Central America's seven countries (or Mexico) into another can be a frenetic, confusing, even scam-ridden experience. But with a little planning it's usually a breeze (make that a slo-o-ow breeze). Some considerations:

- Before you leave one country for another, read that country's entry requirements in the Visas section in the Directory at the back of each country chapter.
- Don't leave a country without getting your passport stamped at that country's immigration office. Occasionally no one will flag you down to do this; be on the lookout for it.
- Often you'll be changing buses at the border, perhaps walking a few hundred meters across, or catching a colectivo (jitney taxi or minibus taxi) to the nearest bus station. Not all of the borders are open 24 hours, but bus schedules tend to match opening hours.
- Many travel agents offer organized trips across the borders; many travelers prefer the ease of having someone there (a driver for example) to help if things get sticky.
- Moneychangers linger around nearly all borders; rates can be fair but some changers do try to shortchange; count carefully. If you're carrying only a local currency, try to change at least some before moving on, as it's possible no one will accept it once you're across.
- Note that, technically, there's a border agreement between Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and Nicaragua, allowing travel up to 90 days in the four-country region – and you shouldn't have to pay to cross into another country; see p733

Also see Overland Routes boxed texts at the beginning of country chapters for border information. Border crossing details appear in boxed texts in relevant sections of the book.

the seasons if you're planning to cycle much. The dry season (roughly December to April) should spare you from soakings.

If you're planning to bike across borders, it's a good idea to keep a document of your ownership handy for immigration officials.

Though dated, the best guide to cycling the region is *Latin America by Bike: A Complete Touring Guide* (1993), by Walter Sienko. Richard Ballantine's *Richard's New Bicycle Book* helps understand the parts. Ian Benford and Peter Hodgkinson's *Cycle Central America* covers southern Mexico, Belize, Guatemala and Honduras.

BOAT

Aside from domestic water-related activities (such as white-water rafting or boating to volcanic islands), a few water journeys connect countries. Travelers between Palenque, Mexico, and Flores, Guatemala, cross the Río Usumacinta near Frontera Corozal, Mexico, and Bethel, Guatemala. Another interesting crossing is between Punta Gorda, Belize, and Puerto Barrios (and sometimes Livingston), Guatemala. There's a rather off-track river border crossing between San Carlos, Nicaragua, and Los Chiles, Costa Rica.

Key domestic water journeys include the ride down the Río Escondidas to Bluefields, Nicaragua, and then out to the Corn Islands in the Caribbean. Guatemala's Río Dulce is another famous ride. Other Caribbean islands that are reached by boat include Honduras' Bay Islands, Belize's Caye Caulker and Mexico's Cozumel and Isla Mujeres.

The Panama Canal is one of the world's most important waterways, connecting the Caribbean and the Pacific.

BUS

Half the stories of the trip will be of how you got around by bus. Bus service is well developed throughout the region, though not always comfortable. While some buses are air-conditioned with reservable reclining seats, you're sure to bounce a time or 20 in one of the famed 'chicken buses.' These are often colorfully repainted former US school buses with a liberal 'bring on what you want' policy (ie chickens).

Avoid night buses throughout the region (with the possible exception of Mexico), as these have been popular targets for highway robbers.

First-class and some 2nd-class buses depart on scheduled times from *terminal de autobuses* (long-distance bus stations); others leave from parking-lot bus terminals once they are full (these stop to collect more passengers all along the way – thus, you're likely to get a lift from the highway if need be). Be aware that many cities have more than one bus station. Bus companies can have their own terminals as well.

Bus frequency can vary. In bigger cities and on more popular routes, smoke-spewing giants troll the streets every few minutes, while in remote places, if you oversleep you'll be staying another night.

Luggage may be stored in a lower compartment or piled on the roof of the bus. Keep an eye on your luggage on bus trips if you can, particularly on the easily accessible racks in a packed bus. Always keep your valuables tucked away on your person. Watch out for pickpockets on crowded buses and in bus stations.

In some places, travel agents run shuttle services (mostly vans with air-con) to popular destinations. They're more comfortable and more expensive (and carry a lot less street cred). An example: Antigua to Panajachel in Guatemala is about US\$8 by shuttle; or you can take three chicken buses and do the route for about a dollar.

Getting There & Away sections following towns and cities list most bus routes and fares; also see the Transportation sections in individual country chapters.

Colectivos & Minibuses

Around Central America, and usually connecting hub towns with smaller ones on short-haul trips, are an array of minibuses of various conditions and nomenclature (called *rapidito* in Honduras, *chiva* in Panama, and *colectivo* in Costa Rica and Mexico). These are cheaper transport options than 1st-class buses, when available, and go frequently – the catch is the frequent stops and that the driver knows no word for 'full.'

Sample Bus Durations

Seeing most of Central America by bus is not difficult, but you'll need time. Here are the durations of some sample bus journeys. Remember that bus connections and border-crossing formalities can add extra time to the trip.

Origin	Destination	Duration
San Cristóbal de Las Casas (M)	Antigua (G)	11 hours
Cancún (M)	Belize City (B)	9-10 hours
Flores (G)	Guatemala City (G)	8-10 hours
Guatemala City (G)	Copán Ruinas (H)	5 hours
San Salvador (ES)	Tegucigalpa (H)	8 hours
Tegucigalpa (H)	Managua (N)	9 hours
Managua (N)	San José (CR)	8-10 hours
San José (CR)	Panama City (P)	15-18 hours

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Driver's License

If you're planning to drive anywhere, check before you leave to see if your country's driver's license is honored in all the countries you plan to hit the road in. It's possible you may need an International Driving Permit (IDP), which is issued by automobile associations worldwide.

Be prepared for police checkpoints – always stop and have your papers handy.

Car Hire

Central America is relatively easy to explore by private vehicle, and would be more popular if it weren't for the cost (rental and petrol) and hassle. Rentals range from about US\$20 per day in Nicaragua to US\$80 per day in Belize. However, rentals are usually not allowed to leave the country – though Budget, for example, allows it if you rent from Nicaragua or Guatemala (only). But renting can make for a memorable splurge day or two, and get you into areas you might otherwise miss (such as isolated beaches south of Tulum in Mexico and around Costa Rica's Península de Nicoya).

In many cases it's cheaper to arrange (even same-day) rentals with major car-rental

agencies on their websites; during research in Tulum we saved 50% on the quoted local fare by going to an internet café next door and booking a car online!

4WD vehicles are more expensive (generally US\$80 to US\$100 per week), and petrol is about US\$1 or US\$1.50 per liter.

Insurance is required – and your coverage back home isn't recognized here. Make sure you have at least collision damage insurance coverage.

To rent a car, you'll need a passport and driver's license. Some agencies rent to those 21 and over, while others to only those 25 and over. All of Central America drives on the right-hand side of the road.

Scooters and bigger motorcycles are available in some places, the latter usually costing about the same price as a compact car.

For more information and general advice on driving in Central America, including liability insurance, see p739.

HITCHHIKING

Hitching (*tomando un jalón*; taking a hitch) is never entirely safe in any country in the world, and Lonely Planet does not recommend it. However, it is common in parts of Central America. Side roads – or wherever the last bus just went by – may tempt you to try. If you do, try to be in groups; solo women should never hitch. If you get a ride, offer to pay petrol money, even if the driver may turn it down.

TRAIN

The only train trip in the region is a very scenic, glass-domed luxury ride from Panama City to Colón, Panama, along the Panama Canal (see p663).

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