

Central America, Roads Less Traveled

By Carla Hunt, Recommend, August 2011

Scenically stunning, culturally captivating, ecologically exciting. Correct, we're talking about Central America. And we're looking at a region that is easily accessible from a dozen U.S. gateways and we're highlighting seven nations – Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama – that individually and collectively offer your leisure clients:



- Natural wonderlands of reefs and rainforests, beaches and volcanoes, national parks and private islands – habitats for hundreds of species of exotic birds and butterflies, flora and fauna.
- Action-packed adventures for those who want to accent vacations with hiking and mountain biking, scuba diving and deep-sea fishing, river rafting and sea kayaking, canopy touring and canyoning.
- Cultural encounters with magnificent Mayan monuments and colonial towns, cosmopolitan capitals and meet-the people country markets.
- Tour packages for everyone and every occasion – locally hosted and escorted, tailored to special interests and wishes of families or honeymooners, golfers or anglers, birders or medical travelers.
- Creature comforts ranging from rustic (and not so rustic) jungle lodges and mountain inns, to seaside resorts liberally laced with sybaritic spas and all-suite treats.
- While the countries of Central Americas have moved decidedly up-market in products and services, they certainly have not lost their appeal for travelers looking for involving experiences and new horizons – somewhat exotic places of discovery, if you will. This special section highlights just samplings of some of the roads less traveled within each destination.

And next year, one historic “highway”, *La Ruta Maya*, is due to find a special place in international travel demand., as the Mundo Maya countries of Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador and Honduras observe the historic year (2012) and date (December 21) when after 5,125 years, the official “long count” Mayan calendar comes to an end and creation begins anew. These pre-Columbian people fashioned brilliant societies, remembered today in monumental temples, palaces and royal tombs – most often in wildlife areas. Luckily, this wondrous world is linked by a network of upgraded roads and TACA’s regional air services to a whole new world of special interest and soft-adventure travel: along the Route of the Maya.

Belize

Toledo District Sweetens a Great Outdoors Vacation with Chocolate

You may have missed it, the 5th Annual Toledo Cacao Festival that is, held this year May 20-22 to celebrate all things

chocolate – from cupcakes and kisses to cacao wine and chocolate cocktails – and to salute the local chocolate producers who all use hand-picked beans from local farms: the Belize Chocolate Company, Cotton Tree Chocolate, Goss Chocolate and Cyrila’s Chocolate. Chocolate touring is now a leading component in the Toledo District’s unique Maya



Village Homestay Network whose various communities welcome tourists with storytelling, music and dance, craft lessons, village tours and traditional foods. Some villages offer overnight stays here in the heartland of the living Maya. In San Felipe village, for instance, Cyrila Cho, whose family has been farming chocolate for generations, welcomes travelers to her “Chocolate Factory” to learn the traditional Mayan chocolate-making process on a farm to table tour. It starts by picking the organically grown fruits along the cacao trail, then adjourns to her kitchen for home roasting and crushing the beans into chocolate lovers treats. From personal experience, believe me, this is work; however guest workers revive with a traditional lunch and hot chocolate...

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Costa Rica

Costa Ballena: A Whale of a Coast

Along the southern Pacific shore, the new Costanera Sur Highway is now paved all the way from Quepos/Manuel Antonio National Park to the Panama border. In between the towns of Dominical and Palmas Sur is the Costa Ballena, a name that tells us only about one attraction: whales – five different species. But in this relatively new tourism frontier in this undiscovered corner of Costa Rica, you also find a bounty of long stretches of nearly deserted beaches and jungled forests, wildlife and birds galore, and active pursuits such as sea kayaking, horseback riding, surfing (or



learning surfing) scuba diving and fishing. You'll also find that migrating whales share these southern Pacific waters with dolphins.

Tom this recent visitor, a good map and a good ground operator can be essential in planning an itinerary, especially when continuing along the highway to include Golfo Dulce and the Osa Peninsula.

Among the commanding attractions are:

Hacienda Baru National Wildlife Refuge: Just north of Dominical, this is a happening place. Its two miles of beach, mangrove swamp and primary rainforest offer a safe haven for the likes of anteaters, ocelots, kinkajours, tayras, capuchin monkeys and jagarundis, and the bird count is over 300 species. Petroglyphs carved onto large rocks are found here, as well as a birding tower, orchid garden, butterfly garden and turtle hatchery. And indeed Olive Ridley and hawksbill turtles nest on Baru Beach. Visitors can reserve guided walks, explore on horseback or take a canopy tour...

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El Salvador

A trio of Roads Less Traveled

Every surfer knows that the most perfect point-break in Central America is Punta Roca outside La Libertad where El Salvador plays host this year (October 16-23) to the *2011 ISA World Masters Surfing Championship*. But any time of year, non-surfers have a dozen or more choices for their own adventure.

For example, from San Salvador, the Pan American Highway to Guatemala leads all the way west to the 9,300 acre *Parque Nacional El Imposible*, one of El Salvador's most bio-diverse and largest parks, rich in bird and wildlife. Dotted with streams,



waterfalls and natural swimming holes. Hikers – mostly following three main trails – who reach the highest lookout points, are able to see Guatemala in the distance. Located near the border of Guatemala at the northern park boundary and fringed by coffee plantations, the mountain hamlet of Tacuba serves as a lovely base for exploring different corners of the 8,100 acre park. Local tour companies have guided (obligatory) to take visitors hiking, biking and birdwatching.

Everyone says that the place to stay in Tacuba is at the **Hostal de Mama y Papa**. The mission that manages El Imposible Park is SalvaNatura, located at the southern park entrance at San Benito. The top accommodation choice here is the El Imposible Eco-Lodge, which also serves as a research center. For visitors coming for the day from San Salvador, during the dry season

(May 16-November 1), the park hike is approximately five hours; in the rainy season (May 16-November 15) hikes are shortened to two hours...

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Guatemala

Time Out for Lake Atitlan

Aldous Huxley called Lake Atitlan the most beautiful lake in the world. Located deep in Guatemala's western highlands, its crystal blue waters are flanked by three spectacular volcanoes – Toliman, San Pedro and Atitlan – and its shorelines are dotted with 12 small Indian villages named after the apostles and home to various Mayan groups, each with its own traditions and dress. While not exactly off the tourist trail, this majestic corner of Guatemala is worth exploring and should be particularly appealing to clients whose happiness is a gorgeous, exotic location offering a five-star adventure and cultural experiences to suit both skill and spirit.

It's a 3-hour drive from Guatemala to Lake Atitlan or two hours from Antigua to the 50-square mile Lake Atitlan whose major town is Panajachel, the most common departure point for boat excursions: by scheduled lanchas, on guided boat tours, on privately chartered craft. Cruising to the eastern end of the lake, you find Santa Catarina, a quaint village with adobe houses built into the hills and with several women's weaving cooperatives fashioning hand woven table coverings, clothing and bed covers. You can also drive here easily, and even stay. Probably the lake's most splendid lodging, the colonial villa-style Casa Palopo offers nine elegant rooms and suites with grand lake views...



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Honduras

Copan & Beyond: The Lenca Trail

Honduras lures its guests with two spectacular assets: the Eden-like Bay Islands for world-class diving along the hemisphere's longest barrier reef, and the majestic ruins of Copan for spending time at one of the grandest of ancient Mayan sites and hiking, bird watching and horseback riding in the Copan Valley. One road less traveled from the charming town of Copan Ruinas leads farther into the western highlands along *la Ruta Lenca*, or the Lenca Trail.

The trail is named for the native people of the region who make up the largest indigenous group in Honduras. Officially the 80-mile route starts in the cool, hilltop town of Santa Rosa de Copan and winds along the pine-forested mountain roads and through a series of small colonial villages from Santa Rosa de Copan to Esperanza, not far from the border with El Salvador. Along the

way, travelers come upon beautiful colonial homes, churches, historic forts, museums and cloud forest surrounding *Montana la Celaque*, the highest point in the country.

Santa Rosa is distinguished by cobble-stone streets, clay-tiled roofs and a lovely church with azulejo (glazed tile) floors.

Prosperity under the Spanish came from establishing a tobacco industry, and the hand-rolled cigars produced here are among the best in the world. Visitors always take a tour of Flor de Copan tobacco factory, and those who are here on the third Friday of



August join in the *Noche de Fumadores*, a lively event dedicated to fine cigars. Santa Rosa de Copan is also known for its religious processions during Semana Santa (Holy Week), a time also for the Artisanal Fair that showcases crafts made in the region. This fair is also held August 25-30 and the second week in December...

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Nicaragua

Catch Island Fever

Many of the most special travel experiences in Nicaragua happen on islands., both those afloat in Lake Nicaragua – a.k.a. Lago Cocibolca – and those off the Caribbean coast.

Ometepe Island is the ecological crown jewel of Lake Nicaragua, which, incidentally, is the size of Puerto Rico in area and the largest lake in Central America. Formed by two volcanoes –



Concepcion still active and Maderas now dormant – and joined by a narrow strip of land, this gem of an island will appeal to nature lovers, archaeology buffs and adventurers. They can go hiking through dense tropical forests, mountain biking, horseback riding, guide climbing of both volcanoes, fishing and kayaking in Reserva Charco Verde; enjoy amazing birding, pre-Columbian petroglyph discovery (concentrated on the Maderas side of the island) and coffee plantation touring; and relax on the island's beaches. Playa Santo Domingo is considered the best of the beaches, located southeast of Altagracia son the east side of Ometepe, where you also find the island's best accommodation, Hotel Villa Paraiso (villaparaiso.com). The most common access to the island is by ferry, making the 1-hour crossing from San Jorge on the mainland to Moyogalpa on the western side of the island; ferries run almost hourly, less frequently on Sundays and not in

bad weather. Less frequent service is available from Granada to Altagracia, home to the Ometepe Museum housing a small collection of ceramics found on the island.

Zapatera Island, northwest of Ometepe, but most accessible from Granada, is a national park where visitors view vestiges of ancient tribes such as royal tombs, zoomorphic statues and a stone sacrificial altar connected to the now-resident Chorotega people. The 20 archaeological sites on the island date as far back as 500 B.C...

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Panama

“Kuna Kingdom” is a World Apart

A short flight from Panama City, yet occupying a world of its own, are the San Blas Islands – officially *Comarca Kuna Yala*, the autonomous territory of the Kuna Indians – whose women folk are dazzling in their gold nose rings, beaded arm ankle bracelets and blouses fashioned with a decorative appliquéd art called *molás*, world-renowned symbols of Kuna culture and one of the most recognized images of Panama. Travelers can watch molas in the making on location, one of the many unique aspects of experiencing the islands’ indigenous lifestyle. However, other top rewards of a San Blas sojourn are swimming off white sand beaches, snorkeling along pristine coral reefs, kayaking from island to island, swinging in a hammock, enjoying coconut cocktails and lots of fresh fish, and joining the islanders in their motorized *Cayucos* (dugout canoes) that travel to different settlements scattered across the archipelago.



Access to the San Blas Islands is by boat or by air from Panama City’s domestic Albrook Airport, where, on checking in, you know you’re headed for an off-the-beaten-path place when both you and your baggage are weighed in before boarding the small aircraft that skins over mist-shrouded rainforest to various island landing strips. In planning and booking a San Blas stay, almost everyone needs an expert who knows Panama. For instance, not all islands have daily services, and lodgings are limited and rustic – some more so than others. Like all businesses in San Blas, lodges are owned and operated by the Kuna, and common to all lodges are: no hot water, limited hours for electricity, and room rates inclusive of meals, with drinks paid separately and in cash. In fact, this Kuna world is a cash only society, although luckily the national currency is the U.S. dollar...

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