Discover the natural and cultural highlights of six Central American countries on this three-week tour which travels from Panama to Guatemala. Visit wildlife-rich national parks and remote islands, uncover ancient secrets in Mayan ruins and roam around colonial cities.

HIGHLIGHTS AND INCLUSIONS

Trip Highlights

- Panama City - visit the famous Panama Canal and explore Central America’s most cosmopolitan and wealthy capital
- Boquete - ride in a chicken bus and explore Panama’s coffee-growing country
- Bocas del Toro archipelago - discover Panama’s pristine islands, with their laid back Caribbean vibe and beautiful beaches
- Sarapiqui - visit some of the wonderful national parks in the area or the Sarapiqui River
- Monteverde National Park - hike through the beautiful cloud forest, shrouded in a canopy of cloud and home to a wonderful array of flora and fauna
- Leon - explore this charming old Colonial town
- Granada - stroll around Central America’s oldest Colonial city on the shore of Lake Nicaragua
- Ometepe - spend three relaxing days on this exquisite volcanic island in the middle of Lake Nicaragua
- Copan - take a guided tour of the world famous Mayan ruins of Copan
- Antigua - Guatemala’s delightful colonial town
- Masaya National Park – visit Nicaragua’s beautiful volcanic crater lakes and walk to the rim of the active volcano
- Suchitoto - take in El Salvador’s captivating cultural capital

What’s Included

- 21 Breakfasts
- 21 nights 3-4 star hotels
- Arrival and departure transfer on days 1 and day 22
- Transfers & transportation in private air-conditioned vehicles with one public bus journey from Panama City to Boquete
- Escorted by an English-speaking local tour leader
- Walking tour of Granada, Panama City & Canal, and Antigua
- Guided tour of Mayan ruins in Copan
- Excursions to Masaya National Park and market, Monteverde Cloud Forest, Colon island, Ometepe Island

What’s Not Included

- International flights and visas
- Tipping - refer to the Tipping paragraph in the Trip Notes for further information
- Border entrance & exit fees - Approx $35USD

DETAILED ITINERARY

Day 1 : Panama City

Saturday. Welcome to Panama! Those passengers arriving on an international flight will be met at the airport by the tour leader or a local representative and escorted to the group hotel. Overnight - Panama City

Day 2 : Panama Sightseeing

Your guided tour explores Central America’s most cosmopolitan and wealthy capital, built along picturesque Panama Bay. The contemporary Hong Kong-style skyscrapers of the Paitilla district dominate the skyline at one end, whilst at the other lies the decaying,
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peeling colonial heart of San Felipe. After discovering the narrow streets, delightful plazas and overhanging balconies of this area you continue to Panama Viejo. This is the site of the city's original settlement until it was ransacked by the infamous British buccaneer Henry Morgan in 1671.

The excursion proceeds out of town to the Panama Canal and the Miraflores Locks. As the excellent visitors' centre elaborates, this extraordinary feat of engineering was started by the French diplomat Ferdinand de Lesseps in 1880, following his success with the recently inaugurated Suez Canal, but was only completed in 1914 after the Americans assumed ownership. To the delight of most Panamanians, the canal was returned to Panama on 31 December 1999. Overnight - Panama City (B)

Day 3 : Boquete
Panama City - Boquete. Board a bus for the journey across western Panama, along the Pan-American Highway (approx. 7 hours) to the city of David where you switch to an old American school bus, known fondly as a ‘chicken bus’, for the last stretch. The ascent to Boquete is the most scenic section of the trip as the road winds up through the mist and into the cloud forest. In the foothills of the Baru volcano the town of Boquete, with its cool, clean air, comes as a pleasant respite from the heat and frenzy of Panama City. This settlement in the heart of Panama’s coffee-growing country is your base for explorations into the surrounding area. Overnight - Boquete (B)

Days 4-5 : Bocas del Toro

Bocas - Bocas del Toro. In the afternoon a bus heading north takes us across the continental divide to the Caribbean coast. This beautiful road winds its way through forested mountain scenery and descends to Almirante, a railhead for the export of bananas grown in the humid lowlands. From here, we board a ferry across the Caribbean to the archipelago of Bocas del Toro, 24 km offshore (30mins in calm weather).

The beautiful islands of Bocas del Toro remain isolated from mainstream tourism, but it won't be long before this densely wooded region of secluded bays, coral reefs and Guaymi Indian settlements is firmly on the map. There are 6 large islands and countless smaller ones. Water taxis ferry local people and tourists between the small communities that dot the archipelago. Only the largest island, Isla Colon, has any roads and there is one major settlement here, Bocas: we spend 2 nights here.

Bocas is an unkempt but charming little seaside town. Even though there is no beach the burgeoning number of lodgings, simple seafood restaurants and little bars, make Bocas a great place to relax. Evenings are balmy and generally low key, with activity restricted to the huddle of welcoming little watering holes along the shore. The archipelago also supports very traditional communities of Guaymi Indian fishermen who live in wooden houses suspended above the water on stilts. They travel solely by canoe, relying on paddle-power to get around.

Explore the islands and revel in the laid-back Caribbean atmosphere on day 5. One optional day trip is to the Bastimentos National Marine Park. Spend the day on the beautiful white sand beaches and delve into the jungle, rich with wildlife, which covers Bastimentos Island. Maybe take the plunge and snorkel around one of the spellbinding coral atolls. (Snorkels can be hired in Bocas.) Alternatively, adopt your own tropical island for the day. Take a short boat trip out to a deserted islet, pursued by playful dolphins, and lounge beneath the palms, or cruise among dense mangroves, spotting marine life beneath the clear surface of the Caribbean. Overnight - Bocas del Toro (B:2)

Days 6-7 : Sarapiqui

Sarapiqui - Sarapiqui (Costa Rica). Back on the mainland, a short, scenic road journey through wooded countryside brings us to the Costa Rican border. An anomaly in Central America, Costa Rica has long been a haven of stability; there’s a democratic government, and they feel no need for a national army.

Starting along the road from Siquirres to Bribri vast tropical plantations stretch on either side as far as the eye can see. After an hour the road returns to the Caribbean coast, and the journey continues for another couple of hours along the picturesque, palm-lined highway to Limon. From here it's another 2hrs onto Sarapiqui, a small town that has become a popular base in which to take advantage of the wonderful forested national parks in the area, dispersed between banana and pineapple plantations.

From the lodge where we are based spend the next day exploring this exciting densely forested region. This exuberant foliage creates an enticing habitat for many species of bird and wildlife and there are numerous national parks to explore. You can view the canopy from above via a series of hanging bridges and towers, or hike through it on trails and paths that wind through the trees. For the more adventurous the Rio Sarapiqui runs just east of the main street and is popular for rafting on its rapids. There are numerous other activities in the area including mountain-biking, boat trips and canopying or you may prefer just to relax and prepare for the next leg of your trip. Overnight - Sarapiqui (B:2)

Days 8-9 : Monteverde National Park

Monteverde. We board a private bus for the 4 hour journey to Santa Elena on the edge of the Monteverde National Park. This is a magical sanctuary of verdant, dripping cloud forest high up in the Costa Rican mountains. Monteverde is home to the
elusive resplendent quetzal, an exotic bird with an emerald green body and rust-red breast which is an iconic symbol of Central America. We have a day here to explore this exquisite region. There is a guided tour of the Cloud Forest or Cuicancha Reserve depending on where the wildlife is best at the time. There are optional excursions to a nearby butterfly farm or, for those in search of a bit of action, there is an optional canopy tour over the cloud forest. **Overnight - Monteverde (B:2)**

**Days 10-12 : Ometepe Island**

Monteverde - Ometepe Island (Nicaragua). We travel into Nicaragua today. Our journey starts with a steep but spectacular descent to the coastal plains, and, weather permitting, we may catch a glimpse of the imposing Arenal volcano. Be prepared for a dramatic rise in temperature. The bus passes through Liberia, a tranquil provincial capital in northern Costa Rica. After two hours we arrive at the border with Nicaragua.

Tourism is still in its infancy in Nicaragua and the infrastructure is not yet well organised enough to handle many tourists. The difference between the two countries is striking. The stability, tranquility and relative affluence of Costa Rica is in marked contrast to the position Nicaragua finds itself in: it has long been plagued by economic and political uncertainty. The people are some of the poorest in Latin America and have suffered much in the past fifty years (through dictatorship, revolution, civil war, hurricanes, and earthquakes). Nowadays however there is a democratic government and development of the tourist sector is proceeding apace. Many visitors find Nicaragua - its welcoming people and unspoilt scenery - a pleasant surprise. The journey continues to San Jorge on the shores of Lake Nicaragua. From San Jorge we catch the next available boat across the lake to the twin volcanoes of Ometepe Island.

Ometepe is a serene and as yet totally undeveloped island. Even in comparison with the rest of Nicaragua, the infrastructure is basic with only rough roads and simple accommodation. Much of the island is still covered in primary rainforest and home to many different species of monkeys and parrots. It is also famous for its pre-Columbian stone statues and petroglyphs, carved by the Chorotega Indians centuries ago.

There are opportunities for scenic and challenging walks on the slopes of the island's imposing volcanoes (Concepcion and Maderas) which dwarf the surrounding landscapes. You can visit one of many coffee cooperatives on the island. Horse-riding and fishing are also options here. Due to heavy rainfall in recent years there is little beach on the island, however, there are many spots to sit back and enjoy the views across the lake and possibly take a dip in its warm waters. **Overnight - Ometepe Island (B:3)**

**Day 13 : Granada**

Ometepe Island - Granada. Head back to the mainland and on to the evocative Spanish colonial town of Granada today. This charming city was once one of the wealthiest in Latin America, a staging post for the shipment of looted gold. The architecture reflects this one-time prosperity: huge wooden doors open on to shady patios in once-aristocratic houses. Efforts are now being made to restore the city's faded splendour and newly promoted tourism has been a trigger for the establishment of many new bars and restaurants. We get a feel for this is fascinating city, on an informal walking tour with our tour leader. **Overnight - Granada (B)**

**Day 14 : Masaya National Park**

We enjoy a trip to Masaya National Park today, visiting volcanic crater lakes, the old hilltop fort of Coyotepe, the impressive and still active Masaya volcano and the town of Masaya itself. The handicraft market in Masaya is well known for its intricate handmade hammocks. **Overnight - Granada (B)**

**Day 15 : Leon**

Granada - Leon. We continue northwards across dusty volcanic plains, passing the Momotombo volcano, to Leon, another of Nicaragua's restored colonial cities. Here time is best spent wandering through the cobbled streets and around the shady plazas and ornate churches composing the town centre. Even during colonial times Leon had a strong liberal tradition (as opposed to the conservatism that characterised Granada), and it has remained the country's radical and intellectual centre, with a thriving university population. The Sandinista heritage is still visible today with a few large murals and revolutionary graffiti plastered over some of the town's white adobe walls. **Overnight - Leon (B)**

**Days 16-17 : Suchitoto in El Salvador**

Leon - Suchitoto (El Salvador). An early morning bus takes us to the border with Honduras, where cutting across the hot coastal plain of Choluteca, we soon cross another border and enter El Salvador. El Salvador is Central America's least visited country and another with a turbulent past, where throughout the 1980s a chaotic civil war was fought in the mountains and fields that...
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dominate the landscape. El Salvador is once again finding its feet, and we're soon whizzing through the country to the untouched colonial city of Suchitoto.

We then have the rest of the evening and following day to explore Suchitoto and its surroundings. Take a short hike to the Los Tercios waterfall, try some local delicacies such as chicha, an alcoholic drink made from corn or the traditional pupusas, thick corn tortillas with meat, vegetable and cheese fillings. For those looking for to immerse in the natural surroundings there is an array of biodiversity to discover in the area. **Overnight - Suchitoto (B:2)**

**Days 18-19 : Copan Ruins**

Suchitoto - Copan (Honduras), Rural Honduras beckons. It's a 6-7 hour journey to Copan today, which, along with Tikal, is the most impressive of the Mayan ruined complexes. This region of western Honduras is a remote province of velvety green hills and rushing rivers, dotted with whitewashed colonial villages where the horse is still the main form of transport. Its genial atmosphere comes in part from its relative prosperity gained through trade in coffee and tobacco, and through the tourism generated by the Mayan ruins.

We spend the night at Copan Ruinas, an attractive, cobbled village close to the site. There is time for a short hill walk, a visit to some nearby hot springs, but the main attractions, of course, are the archaeological site and the superb new museum, both of which you visit the following day.

Copán is unique, not so much for its impressive temples, but for the exquisite stelae and their artwork: huge, intricately carved statues depict the complicated history of the area and its great rulers. One of the highlights is the imperious hieroglyphic stairway; each of its 63 steps is sculpted with hundreds of different glyphs that describe important events in Copan’s rise to prominence among the elite city states of the Mayan world. Copan flourished between 250 and 900 AD, at which point its prosperity mysteriously declined. Within about 100 years, this once-sophisticated city had been reclaimed by the jungle, only to be discovered by the Spanish conquistadors in the late 16th century, and subsequently excavated 300 years later. **Overnight - Copan (B:2)**

**Days 20-21 : Antigua**

Copan - Antigua. The Guatemalan border is a 10 minute drive from Copan and from here we continue to Antigua. There is a marked change in temperature as you climb into the highlands. ‘Land of eternal spring’ is an accolade adopted by Guatemalans to describe the climate of this western highland region, where the heat is benign and nights are pleasantly cool.

Guatemala is unique in Central America; a mysterious, timeless country in which half of the population is Mayan Indian. Many, especially women in the highlands, still dress in their traditional hand-woven clothing, similar to that which was worn over a thousand years ago. Antigua is a colonial city of cobbled streets, overhanging tiled roofs and a beautiful, leafy central plaza. There is an abundance of huge, ruined churches, convents and monasteries, testament to a time when Antigua was the country's capital and its main religious centre. It seems that every doorway opens onto a leafy tiled courtyard.

A dramatic backdrop of smouldering volcanoes reminds you how the city was destroyed by an eruption in 1773. Antigua is a welcoming place to relax and unwind, do some shopping and enjoy some excellent food, or just to wander around the ruined convents and enjoy the flowers in their beautifully tended gardens. **Overnight - Antigua (B:2)**

**Day 22 : Antigua**

Depart for international flight or extension. **(B)**

**HOTELS**

The hotels listed below are ones which we frequently use on this tour. We reserve the right to substitute these hotels to ones of a similar standard when necessary.

**Tirimbina Rainforest Lodge**

Nestled in the Tirimbina Nature Reserve in the Sarapiqui region, the Tirimbina Lodge, along the Sarapiqui river, is perfect for nature lovers. The property features an extensive garden which offers more than 9km of walking trails over suspension bridges and through lush forest in the hopes of seeing some of the resident wildlife. Each air-conditioned guest room features a fan, safety box and garden views. Other features of the Lodge include a terrace, guided excursions through the Nature Reserve and an onsite restaurant that serves buffet food using fresh ingredients.

**Monteverde Country Lodge**

Combining cosy rustic style with comfortable facilities, the Monteverde Country Lodge offers a warm welcome to its guests. The neatlly kept gardens are a lovely place to relax whilst the wooden guest rooms offer an escape in one of the world's most famous cloud forests. Located less than 10 minutes away from the Monteverde Cloud Forest Biological Preserve and in a walkable distance from Santa Elena Downtown.
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Hotel Villa Paraiso
Located on the forested Ometepe Island, in a secluded corner on Santo Domingo beach is the Hotel Villa Paraiso. The comfortable air-conditioned cabins are equipped with cable tv and private bathrooms with hot water as well as a front porch with hammocks and chairs, so guests can sit back, relax and enjoy the scenery. After a day of exploring the island, enjoy an authentic meal at the onsite thatched bar and restaurant or take a dip in the onsite pool surrounded by lush forest.

Hotel Con Corazon
Boasting a central location in Granada, this modern hotel is located within minutes of the colonial plaza. Its guestrooms offer patio and swimming pool views, alongside free WiFi, TV, and air-conditioning. Start your day with breakfast in the on-site restaurant or take a dip in the on-site swimming pool. As well as offering all modern comforts, all profits from the property and invested into local education projects.

Hotel Austria
Situated in a central location in downtown Leon, this hotel is a five-minute walk of a wide variety of churches, colonial buildings and the beach. Its air-conditioned guestrooms are equipped with flat-screen TV, private bathroom and toiletries. Start your day with a continental or American breakfast or sit back and relax in the courtyard.

Posada Suchitlan
Boasting an excellent location on the edge of Suchitoto’s mains square with spectacular views of the valley and lake Suchitlan, is the Posada Suchitlan. Guest rooms feature warm-coloured bed spreads and are equipped with TV, air-conditioning and views of the colonial courtyard or lake. Guests can enjoy a daily continental breakfast and a selection of regional dishes n the on-site restaurant. The hotel also features a swimming pool fringed with greenery, so guests can take a dip after a long day of sightseeing.

La Casa De Cafe
Located just a stones throw away from the Copan Central Park, in a colonial village is the La Casa De Café. The comfortable guestrooms are equipped with hot water, ceiling fan and oversized windows offering spectacular views of the Copan River, the mountains and the properties very own tropical garden. The hotel also features a massage parlour, extensive library, and on-site restaurant. The hotel also guests can watch the sunset while enjoying their dinner.

Villa Colonial
Set on a quiet corner in Antigua, within walking distance of the capitals main square is the Villa Colonial. All guestrooms feature a shared balcony or patio, cable TV and private bathroom with toiletries. Start your day off with a complimentary breakfast in the courtyard garden before taking a dip in the swimming pool. After a day of exploring this UNESCO-listed city, you can dine in the onsite restaurant offering a mix of local and international cuisine.

Our Partners
This tour is operated in conjunction with our trusted partner and you will join travellers who booked through different operators, not solely On The Go.
The sightseeing group may vary in size from 4 – 20 persons.

Tour Leader
On this tour, you’ll be accompanied from start to finish by one of our exceptional tour leaders. From the moment you land in Latin America until the day the tour ends they will deal with all the practicalities, expertly adapting to the circumstances and individual needs of the group. Rather than different guides in different cities, your leader will get to know the group and keep you informed and entertained as you go.

Transport
10 road journeys (longest 8 hours) most with stops

Accommodation
On this tour the standard of accommodation varies. We utilise comfortable and attractive hotels/guesthouses but in remote locations where options are limited, accommodation is purely functional. All properties are well maintained and almost all will have a private bathroom.
Examples of hotels include:
- Panama City: Hampton Inn
- Boquete: Casa de la Abuela
- Bocas del Toro: Bocas Inn
- San Jose: Tirimbina Lodge or La Quinta
- Monteverde: Monteverde Lodge
- Ometepe Island: Villa Paraiso
- Granada: Hotel Con Corazon
- León: Hotel Austria
- Suchitoto: Posada Suchitlan
- Copán Ruinas: Casa de la Café
- Antigua: Villa Colonial

On very rare occasions these hotels can change, however please speak to one of
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our consultants who can provide full details for each departure if you have any doubts. Address and contact details will be sent out with your final documents.

Optional Excursions
There is a range of optional excursions available throughout this holiday which can be booked locally through your tour leader once you are in Latin America. Not all excursions available will suit everybody, whilst others only operate within certain seasons, with minimum numbers or may not be included due to time constraints.

A budget of around $280USD should cover participation in some of the following options, but prices can fluctuate depending on the size of the party and so cannot be provided accurately until travel commences. The list below is only a guideline, so please enquire with your tour leader for any further areas of interest:

• Boquete: tour of a coffee plantation, walk to the Bajo Mano waterfall
• Bocas del Toro: boat trips out to islands to snorkel, dolphin spot or swim off the white sand beaches
• Sarapiquí: hanging bridges in Tirimbina National Park
• Sarapiquí: white-water rafting, tubing or boating
• Monteverde: zip lining, canopy walking or horseriding
• Monteverde: night tour of the cloud forest
• Ometepe Island: volcano climbing
• Ometepe Island: island tour or explore by bicycle, horse, quad bike or motorcycle
• Granada: sunset boat ride out among the Isletas
• Granada: tour the ceramics museum
• León: visit the Museo de la Revolución, Museum of legends and traditions and Museo de Arte Ortiz Gurdian
• Suchitoto: sunset boat rides on Lake Suchitlán
• Suchitoto: cultural village tour or birdwatching by kayak
• Antigua: climb Pacaya volcano
• Antigua: visit surrounding indigenous villages

Travelling alone
There is no extra cost for single travellers who are willing to share a room. You will be accommodated with a same-sex member of the group who is usually also travelling solo. For single travellers who wish to be sure of having their own room there are a limited number of single rooms available, which carry a surcharge.

Budget
A budget of around $45USD per day should cover the cost of meals, drinks and the odd souvenir, although prices do vary greatly from country to country.

Tipping
Tips are normally welcomed and expected. Local guides often rely on their tip as a significant proportion of their income. We recommend approximately $3USD (or local equivalent) per person per day for each of guides and drivers, depending on the size of the group.

Most service industry workers will expect a tip of some kind and so it is useful to have spare change for hotel porters, taxi drivers and the like. It is common to leave 10 - 12% in restaurants.

If you would like to show your appreciation to your tour leader, who you may feel has exceeded your expectations, a discretionary gratuity would be gratefully received. As a guideline we recommend an amount of between $4 and $6USD per person, per day. You are obviously free to tip more or less as you see fit, depending on your perception of service quality.

Insurance
Travel insurance is essential.

Journey grade
There are some very early mornings and long days of travel (all of which have comfort or place-of-interest stops). All walks are optional, and you can discuss with your tour leader which are suitable for you. The ascent of the Poas and Maderas Volcanoes is steep and at high altitude, while other hikes are gentler.

White water rafting and horse riding options require no previous experience, although for the former you do need to be able to swim.

Clothing & special equipment
Bring plenty of light cotton clothing and good, comfortable walking shoes. Some warm items and good waterproof jackets are also necessary for all departures. We suggest that you plan to ‘layer’ your clothing. It is easier and more efficient to put on a couple of light layers than one thick jumper. Sandals are a good informal option for evenings. Protection against the sun (sun protection cream, hat) and mosquito repellent are essential and you should bring swimwear. A backpack or soft holdall is the most sensible and comfortable way to carry your belongings. Light sleepers should pack ear plugs. Owing to the number of road journeys on this trip, we recommend passengers pack as lightly as possible. There are plenty of opportunities to do laundry on the trip, and your tour leader will be able to advise about the best places to do this.

Please get in touch with the office before departure if you have any doubts. Good equipment is very important and hard to come by in Central America.

Vaccinations
Preventative vaccinations are recommended against the following: typhoid; polio; tetanus; hepatitis A. You should consult a health care professional for specific requirements, including advice on malaria tablets. It is essential (for crossing borders) that you bring an official yellow fever vaccination certificate, which you should carry with the rest of your travel documents. Please take precautions against biting mosquitoes as cases of dengue fever have recently been reported in several areas of Guatemala.

You can also find helpful information on the Masta Travel Health website. https://www.masta-travel-health.com/

Cases of Zika virus have been reported in areas of Guatemala.

You should follow the advice of the National Travel Health Network and Centre.

Know before you go

Costa Rica Country Guide
Wonders of Central America

Costa Rica - Fact File
- Official Name: Republic of Costa Rica
- Capital: San Jose
- Population: 4.9 million
- Total Area: 51,100 square kilometres
- Official Language: Spanish
- Religions: Roman Catholic 76%, Evangelical 13%, others 10%
- Voltage: 110 volts, US-style two pronged plugs
- Dialling Code: +506
- Time Difference: GMT/UTC -6
- Airport Departure Tax: US$29 - can be paid on arrival to avoid queues when departing.

Costa Rica - Visas
It is important to check with your nearest embassy or consulate regarding the rules depending on your nationality however most nationals do not need a visa to enter Costa Rica. Entry will be granted as long as your passport is valid for more than six months and you have proof of funds to support yourself during your stay as well as a return ticket (this is not usually requested). On arrival to Costa Rica you will be presented and requested to fill out an immigration/tourist card which you will need to keep a copy of until you leave the country. As a tourist you are usually granted with 30 days however this will depend on the immigration official you speak to.

Costa Rica - Climate
Costa Rica has a tropical and subtropical climate depending on the time of year. The dry season usually runs from December – April, whilst rainy season runs from May – November with the highlands offering cooler temperatures. Visit www.worldclimate.com to get an idea of what the weather will be like on your tour.

Costa Rica - Money
The currency used in Costa Rica is the Costa Rican colon. For up-to-date exchange rates with your own currency visit www.xe.com.

Changing money, credit cards & ATMs
Generally, the easiest way to obtain local currency is to use ATM’s. CIRRUS ATMs are available at most major tourist locations and as long as you have a four-digit pin you can withdraw cash with ease, however you should not rely on this as there are times the machines won’t work even if your bank tells you they will. Always have a few back-ups just in case.

Visa is the most accepted credit card however due to poor connections there can be issues with the machines accepting the purchase even if you have funds in your account. There may also be a commission added to your bill (usually 8%), so it is advisable to pay with cash where you can.

Travellers cheques can often be a hassle to cash in Costa Rica so if you do decide to take them, make sure they are in US dollars and ‘American Express’ cheques as they are more widely accepted.

San Jose is the easiest place (and sometimes the only place) for you to stock up on money. There is no restriction on the amount of foreign currency that you may bring into Costa Rica, however very large sums should be declared on arrival.

Remember that once out of Costa Rica you will generally not be able to use or exchange colonies (except at the border towns). Therefore, you must make sure you spend/exchange/donate any left-over money before leaving the country.

Costa Rica - Local Transport
Taxis are recommended for most journeys in San Jose. All taxis should have a meter but it’s a good idea to be aware of what the approximate price should be before getting in the taxi. In other Costa Rican towns and cities, walking is basically the best and cheapest way to see the sights.

Costa Rica - Food & Drink

Food
There’s a lot of different food options to choose from in Costa Rica and travellers are usually surprised by the variety on offer. The Caribbean coast tends to offer dishes influenced by the island nations and curry spices are heavily used whereas on the Pacific Coast in the Guanacaste Province there are still a lot of ancient indigenous influence where maize is heavily used.

Local cuisine is simple yet tasty and not very spicy. The national dish of “Gallo Pinto”, consists of red and white beans with rice, sometimes served with egg, is the most common breakfast dish. The Gallo pinto from the Caribbean side is made with coconut milk and is very tasty.

Lunch is a similar affair however the rice and beans are usually supplemented with meat, fried plantain, salad and cabbage. Other specialties include “Sopa negra” (Black bean soup) and “Olla de carne” (beef, plantain, corn, yucca and chayote soup).

Vegetarians
If you are a strict vegetarian you may experience a distinct lack of variety in the food available, especially in small towns. You might find that you are eating a lot of omelettes and other egg dishes. Our tour leaders will do their best to provide interesting vegetarian alternatives when arranging group meals, but your patience and understanding is requested.

Drink
Costa Rica has no national drink, however “horchata”, a cinnamon flavoured drink made of ground rice, “batidos”, fresh fruit shakes made with milk or water and ice, and “fresco de frutas”, a fruit salad floating on a base of cola and water are very popular.

Beer is also heavily on offer in Costa Rica with countless larger, and dark beers on offer. The most popular are Bavaria and Imperial. Wine, once a rare commodity, has become more common in higher end restaurants, where there are good Chilean and Argentinean varieties on offer. Also, very popular is “guaro”, a clear spirit distilled from fermented sugarcane.

All drinks such as water, soft or alcoholic drinks are at your own expense throughout the tour. The following is a guideline for drinks bought in a shop in the street. Prices in restaurants and hotels can sometimes be more than double the prices specified below:
- 1 litre of water US$1
- 30cl bottle of soft drink US$1
- 30cl bottle of beer US$1.50
- 50cl bottle of beer US$2

You should be wary of drinking the local tap water. Bottled water and carbonated soft drinks are widely available and are generally safe to drink.

Costa Rica - Bugs
Should your tour include any visit to the jungle/rainforest region you should be prepared to come into contact with an array of
Guatemala - Fact File

- Official Name: Republic of Guatemala
- Capital: Guatemala City (often just called Guatemala, or even Guate)
- Population: 15.1 million
- Total Area: 108,890 square kilometres
- Official Language: Spanish 60%, Amerindian languages 40% (23 officially recognized, including including Quiche, Cakchiquel, Kekchi, Mam, Garifuna, and Xinca)
- Religions: Roman Catholic and indigenous Mayan beliefs
- Voltage: 110 volts
- Dialling Code: +502
- Time Difference: GMT/UTC -7
- Airport Departure Tax: US$40 plus US$3 security tax to be paid at airport

Guatemala - Visas

It is important to check the rules of your nationality with your nearest embassy or consulate however most nationals do not need a visa to enter Guatemala. On arrival you will be requested to show proof of your passport which must be valid for more than 6 months as well as proof of funds to support yourself. As a tourist you will be entitled to 90 days, however depending on the immigration official you may be allocated less. Anyone wishing to extend must submit an extension application to the Migration Directorate in Guatemala City. You will be asked to fill out an immigration card which must be kept with your passport until you leave the country. Single entry tourist visas cost US$25.

Guatemala is part of the Central America-4 (CA-4) Border Control Agreement. As part of this agreement eligible foreign nationals can travel within the four countries (El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras & Nicaragua) for a period of up to 90 days without completing entry and exit formalities at border immigration checkpoints. If travellers wish to remain in this area for more than 90 days they should research extensions. Overstayers can expect a fine.

Guatemala - Climate

Guatemala’s rainy season runs from around May/June until September/October however in the majority of places this generally only means sporadic showers throughout the day which don’t usually last very long. The only place where rain is guaranteed all year round is in the middle of the rainforest in Rio Dulce, where the rainy season can sometimes last until February. In the Guatemalan Highlands temperatures at night time are quite cool (Antigua, Lake Atitlan and especially Quetzaltenango). For example, December/January nights in the highlands can drop to zero centigrade. Generally, the hottest time in Guatemala will be the months of April to May (before the rain comes). Visit www.worldclimate.com to get an idea of what the weather will be like on your tour.

Guatemala - Currency

The monetary unit in Guatemala is the quetzal. For up-to-date exchange rates with your own currency visit www.xe.com.

Changing money, credit cards & ATMs

US dollars are widely accepted in Guatemala however it is recommended to carry quetzals with you, especially smaller bills as larger bills may be harder to break in smaller towns and local establishments. Even if you have the option to pay in dollar it is recommended you pay in local currency.

We recommend you exchange this before entering the country to obtain the best exchange rates. Remember once out of Guatemala you will not be able to use or exchange quetzals (except in border towns) so we recommend you spend/exchange/donate any left over money before leaving the country.

US dollars and travellers cheques can be changed at casas de cambio (exchange bureau), banks and border crossings. Your tour leader will give you details of when and where best to change money. Casas de cambio are privately owned, usually have longer opening hours and attend to you faster than banks.

Another way to obtain local currency is to use the ATM machines located throughout most of Guatemala. Please note there will be a fee to use foreign credit or debit cards when withdrawing cash from an ATM. Although bank cards are often the easiest way to go, there are times where they will not work for you even if your bank at home tells you it will. Do not rely on your card as your only source of money. Always have a few back-ups with you. In Guatemala you will never be able to use US dollar notes which are torn or marked even slightly. If your notes are at all damaged you may use them in Belize, but not in Guatemala or Mexico.

Travelers checks are a safe way to carry money in Guatemala but they can be time consuming and you’ll only be able to cash them in cities and tourist destinations with full service banks. American Express is the most common and widely accepted check but proof of purchase may be requested. If you do decide to queue in a bank, always check that what you want to do is going to be possible before lining up. Different banks have different rules. For example some banks do not exchange travellers cheques. They may also have a limit to the amount of US dollars you can exchange. Always try to exchange as much as you can at one time and try to ask cashiers for small notes “billetes pequeñas” as you will find it very difficult to break large notes throughout Latin America. Always make sure you put your cash inside your money belt before you leave the premises. Pickpockets tend to loot near banks and change houses.

Guatemala - Tipping

A 10% sales tax is usually included in the price of hotels, shops and restaurants however may be added to your bill if not. If it is not added on, it is still expected (especially in higher end restaurants). You are not expected to tip taxi drivers unless they go out of their way for you although you should tip anyone who helps with your luggage, approx 50-80cents (QS). Tour guides are usually tipped 5% and it is common practice to leave spare change to the small comedores.
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Guatemala - Shopping

Guatemala’s markets have some of the best shopping in Central America and are best for local products. With so much to choose from its hard to choose what to buy but there are jade and wood carvings, ceramics, basketry as well as Mayan jewellery. The Central Market and Craft Market in Guatemala City, as well as Chichicastenango and the Highland area of Guatemala has by far the best bargains and most variety, due to the strong indigenous influence in this area (Antigua and Lake Atitlan). Bargaining is expected whilst shopping in the markets of Guatemala. In shops it is considered rude to bargain, but you can ask for a ‘discount’ (‘descuento’ in Spanish).

Guatemala - Local Transport

Taxis are cheap in Guatemala and we recommend using them at night. Most taxis do not have meters, so you will have to agree on a price before getting in the cab. The ‘chicken buses’ (locally called camonetas) are in fact old second-hand American school buses which have been painted in all sorts of bright colours and covered with religious decorations! They are extremely cheap for getting around and they go everywhere! They’re safe to use as long as you use common sense - beware of thieves and pickpockets. These buses become very crowded, sometimes 6 people to one seat (at considerable risk of being robbed on the road-side). If you have any allergies to foods, please come prepared with a list to give to your tour leader, who will then be able to try and accommodate your dietary needs.

Vegetarians

- Specify if you don’t want meat in your meals
- ‘No pescado, no pollo, no carne’

Guatemala - Food & Drink

People are often surprised by the quality and variety on offer in Guatemala. This is partly due to the number of ex-pats who have opened up a range of different international restaurants. There is also local cuisine to suit every budget. Chicken, pork and beef are available throughout. Most meals come with corn tortillas and sometimes salad, but often lack hot vegetables. Although you might expect the food to be spicy in this region (‘picante’ in Spanish), this is not usually the case. Your tour leader will be able to recommend restaurants.

Food

Corn (maize), is the staple diet of Guatemala’s indigenous people and you will certainly get a lot of it. Mostly in the form of tortillas which are flat pancake-like things made of corn dough and grilled. The following are a few Guatemalan specialties:

- Tamales – Corn dough stuffed with meat, fruit and nuts, wrapped in banana leaves.
- Kaq Ik – Turkey soup with herbs from the Alta Verapaz region.
- Bistec or Pollo Asado - Beef steak or grilled chicken. These are common meals, usually served with tortillas, rice, spring onion, white cheese, and salad.

If you have any allergies to foods, please come prepared with a list to give to your tour leader, who will then be able to try and accommodate your dietary needs.

Vegetarians

- If you are a strict vegetarian you may experience a distinct lack of variety in the food available, especially in small towns. You might find that you are eating a lot of omelettes and other egg dishes. Our tour leaders will do their best to provide interesting vegetarian alternatives when arranging group meals in the campsite, but your patience and understanding is requested.

Drink

Guatemalan fruit is fresh and cheap. Go to one of the many juice stands and ask for a fruit smoothie “liquado de fruta” with one of the many ingredients to choose from including melon, watermelon, mango, pineapple as well as celery and beetroot. The smoothies are usually made with water or milk and you must always specify if you don’t want sugar as Latin American’s tend to have a very sweet tooth. You will also find all sorts of orange, grape, lemon, and lime soft drinks (“Gaseosas”).

“Aqua Mineral” is sparkling water.

Nicaragua Country Guide

Nicaragua - Fact File

- Official Name: Republic of Nicaragua
- Capital: Managua
- Population: 5.3 million
- Total Area: 129,494 square kilometres
- Official Language: Spanish
- Religions: Roman Catholic 85%
- Voltage: 110 volts, US-style two flat-pinned sockets
- Dialling Code: +505
- Time Difference: GMT/UTC – 6
- Airport Departure Tax: US$25

Nicaragua - Visas

It is important to check the rules of your nationality with your nearest embassy or consulate however most nationals do not need a visa to enter Nicaragua. On arrival you will be requested to show proof of your passport which must be valid for more than 6 months as well as proof of funds to support...
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yourself. As a tourist you will be entitled to 90 days, however depending on the immigration official you may be allocated less. Anyone wishing to extend must submit an extension application to the Migration Directorate in Honduras. You will be asked to fill out an immigration card which must be kept with your passport until you leave the country. Single entry tourist visas cost as little as US$10, however depending on how long you stay this could increase.

Nicaragua is part of the Central America-4 (CA-4) Border Control Agreement. As part of this agreement eligible foreign nationals can travel within the four countries (El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras & Nicaragua) for a period of up to 90 days without completing entry and exit formalities at border immigration checkpoints. If travellers wish to remain in this area for more than 90 days they should research extensions. Overstayers can expect a fine.

Nicaragua - Climate
Nicaragua's climate differs depending on the region you're visiting however for the most part the climate is tropical, with the average temperature of 27°C all year round. In the mountains to the west, the average temperature hovers around 12 °C - 20 °C and areas closer to sea level range between 22 °C to 30 °C.

The dry season runs from December to May and the rainy season runs from June to November except on the Pacific side where rainy season runs from May to November. The highest volume of rain fall comes from the Atlantic north-western side.

Nicaragua - Currency
The monetary unit in Nicaragua is the Cordoba. For up-to-date exchange rates with your own currency visit www.xe.com.

Changing money, credit cards & ATMs
US dollars (cash) are widely accepted in Nicaragua. Smaller businesses and local businesses may deal in cash only so it is advisable to always have a few back-ups with you. Even if you do have the option to pay in US dollars it is in your best interest to pay with the local currency.

Often the easiest way to obtain cash is through the use of ATMs or exchange bureaus at borders. ATMs will dispense both local currency and US dollars (do not accept if the note is ripped or marked) however it is good to note that not all ATMs are reliable. Your tour leader will assist you with finding somewhere to exchange your currency. Do not rely on your card as your only source of money. Always have a few back-ups with you.

Nicaragua - Tipping
In higher end restaurants 10-15% tip is customary and usually included in the bill however in most places tipping is optional, and the servers depend on tips for their livelihood. It is best to tip your server directly. You do not need to tip taxi drivers, etc but you should tip people who assist you with your luggage at hotels (don't over-tip – 50 cents or so is fine). Tipping guides at the end of excursions is always appreciated and your tour leader will advise you on the amount for this.

Nicaragua - Shopping
Nicaragua offers shopping for everyone. From high end shops to bustling markets there is something for everyone. The Masaya Market is handicraft heaven offering wood carvings, hand woven hammocks, black pottery, coconut shell jewellery and much more. Granada offers colonial era antiques and high-end souvenirs including handmade jewellery. The Roberto Huembes market in Managua offers a wide range of crafts from around the country. Bargaining is expected while shopping in the markets, but in shops it is usually considered rude to bargain. However, you may always ask for a ‘discount’ (‘descuento’ in Spanish). Be sure to bring cash with you as there are usually few ATMs close to the markets and some retailers don't accept card payments.

Nicaragua - Local Transport
In most Nicaraguan towns and cities, walking is the best and cheapest way to see the sights, but there will be times when you will want to get a taxi (particularly at night when it's considered unsafe to walk the streets). Most city taxis are ‘colectivos’ and will stop to pick up other people on the way and do not have meters so you will need to agree on a price before setting off.

Local buses are also an option but can be chaotic and confusing. Do not attempt the local buses with luggage as pickpocketing is common however if you exercise the usual common sense/precautions, this can be a wonderful experience – and extremely inexpensive. Average cost of bus tickets around town are US$0.20. A two hour journey will cost approx. US$1.00.

Nicaragua - Food & Drink
Rice and beans (gallo pinto) is at the heart of most dishes throughout Central America but in different variations. The staple rice and beans dish can be served with everything from eggs for breakfast to meat and plantains for dinner. Meals are cheap and can cost as little as US$1.50 - $5, even in the higher end restaurants you would pay considerably less than you would at home. Obviously, this depends on what you order and will increase if you have wine or other drinks with your meal.

Along the Atlantic coastline, the food has distinctive influences from the Caribbean islands, species and coconut milk are usually added to their dishes as well as any other sweet coconut-based pastries. Other typical dishes include patacones, (fried green plantain chips) and fresh water fish. All drinks such as water, soft or alcoholic drinks are at your own expense at all times. The following is a rough guideline for drinks bought in a shop in the street. Prices in restaurants and hotels can sometimes be more than double the prices specified below: 1 litre of water US$0.70

30cl bottle of soft drink US$0.60

30cl bottle of beer US$1.30

50cl bottle of beer US$1.80

Customs and import regulations
You can import up to 500g of tobacco or 20 packs of cigarettes, 5 liters of alcohol, 2 kilograms of confectionery and other goods of up to the value of US$500. However, we recommend that you only bring in the electrical goods that you absolutely need for personal use, otherwise you may become
under suspicion of attempting to give them to the locals, which is a criminal offence.

Panama Country Guide

Panama - Fact File

- Official Name: Republic of Panama
- Capital: Panama City
- Population: 3.7 million
- Total Area: 75,990 million square kilometres
- Official Language: Spanish
- Religions: Roman Catholic 85%, protestant 15%
- Voltage: 110 volts, US-style two flat-pinched sockets
- Dialling Code: +507
- Time Difference: GMT/UTC -5
- Airport Departure Tax: A departure tax of approximately USD $40 is payable when you leave the country. This tax depends on which airline you are travelling with and your onward destination. Make sure you have the money just in case if you are unsure whether you need to pay it.

Panama - Visas

Visas are not required by most nationals to enter Panama, but it is important to check the rules for your nationality with your nearest embassy or consulate. Entry is granted on production of a passport valid for more than 6 months. You will also be given a tourist card which is issued for 30 days and is renewable at the immigration office in Panama. You may also need an onward flight ticket or evidence of one, and proof that you have funds to support yourself. As a tourist you are entitled to stay 30 days, however depending on the immigration official you may be allocated fewer days. Visitors exceeding 30 days will need an exit permit stamped in their passports before leaving.

You will probably be asked to fill out an immigration card. A copy of this card should be kept in your passport until you exit the country.

Panama - Climate

Panama's dry season lasts from mid-December to mid-April while the rainy season goes from mid-April to December. North of the mountains, on the Caribbean side of Panama, it rains all year round however the rain rarely lasts all day and it tends to rain less in February, March, September and October. Temperatures are typically hot in the lowlands throughout the year; days usually reach around 32°C. The hottest months are March and April.

Visit www.worldclimate.com to get an idea of what the weather will be like on your tour.

Panama - Money

The local currency is the Panamanian balboa, which is pegged to the US dollar. US-dollar notes and coins are legal tender and many prices are quoted in USD dollars. For up-to-date exchange rates with your own currency visit www.xe.com.

Some stores may be reluctant to accept $50 and $100 notes because of counterfeiting, so it is recommended to bring smaller denominations. It is also recommended to retain smaller denominations for border crossings etc. There is no restriction on the amount of foreign currency that you may bring into Panama however very large sums should be declared on arrival.

Changing money, credit cards & ATMs

ATM machines can be found in most cities and towns throughout the country and are usually located in or next to banks or in streets marked with signs. Banks usually charge a fee to withdraw money and most banks limit your withdrawal to US$500. Travellers checks can still be cashed at some of the larger banks in the cities however are not usually recommended. Only US dollars will be accepted and you will usually be charged 1% of the transaction price. Do not rely on your card as your only source of money. Always have a few back-ups with you.

Panama - Tipping

In some restaurants a 10% service charge is included on the bill, and if it is not included it is expected, as gratuities are a large part of their wages. If you want to tip extra on top of this it is optional. You do not need to tip taxi drivers, but you should tip people who assist you with your luggage at hotels (don’t over-tip – US $0.50 to US$1 or so is fine). Tipping guides at the end of excursions is always appreciated and your tour leader will advise you on this.

Panama - Shopping

Panama is known as a duty-free haven where goods from all over the world can be bought at a reduced rate. Panama City is full of modern shopping malls offering luxury branded goods. For those looking for traditional souvenirs Panama is known for its local leatherwear, Indian made beaded necklaces, native costumes and much more. Other Panamanian crafts include carved tagua nuts, cocobolo carvings of animals, and woven palm-fibre baskets and of course the famous Panama hat. We recommend a visit to the Balboa & Panama Viejo markets. Bargaining is expected while shopping in the markets, but in shops it is usually considered rude to bargain. You may however ask for a ‘discount’ (“descuento” in Spanish).

Panama - Local Transport

Panama City can be toured on foot once you are in the old town. Bus travel is also a good way to travel to other districts but can be crowded. The most common form of transport is taxis, which should have meters, especially in major cities. If the taxi doesn’t have a meter be sure to agree a rate before starting your journey. Drivers do not expect tips but will likely pick up other people en route. If you’re unhappy with this, please let them know.

Panama - Food & Drink

A simple snack can cost as little as US$2, and a cheap local breakfast will cost approx. US$4. However, should you wish to dine in international or tourist restaurants the price will differ and will cost US$10-15 per meal. Even a meal in one of the best restaurants in Panama costs very little in comparison to what you would expect to pay at home (usually around US$15 - $30). Obviously, this depends on what you order and if you have wine or other drinks which will certainly increase the bill. Your tour leader will be able to recommend restaurants. As Panama has a wide mix of cuisine its only right the food does too and there is a huge variety of cuisine on offer including French, North American and Spanish. Creole cuisine is usually hot and spicy with rice always present in every dish. The Caribbean coast offers excellent fresh seafood, be sure to try Ceviche.
Wonders of Central America

and of course the national dish of sancocho de gallina, a traditional stew. All drinks such as water, soft or alcoholic drinks are at your own expense at all times. The following is a rough guideline for drinks bought in a shop in the street. Prices in restaurants and hotels can sometimes be more than double the prices specified below:

- 1 litre of water US$1
- 30cl bottle of soft drink US$1
- 30cl bottle of beer US$1.50
- 50cl bottle of beer US$2

Panama is one of the best coffee producers in the world, however coffee can be hit or miss in different regions of Panama because much of the highest quality beans are exported all over the world. Coffee is traditionally served strong and mixed with hot milk, however now they have options in most tourist locations such as cappuccino, lattes and even mochas. If you ask for tea (“té negro”) you will get teabags. Always ask for “leche fria a parte” (cold milk on the side) as the alternative is likely to be a hot cup of milk with a tea bag inside.

If you only learn one word in Spanish it’s bound to be Cerveza. There are countless lagers, and a few dark beers. The most common are national beers (Balboa, Atlas, Soberana, Goldbest, Panamá), but you can find some imported beers if you prefer. Balboa is the best of the domestic brands. Beer can cost as low as 35 cents for a 30cl can.

Carta Vieja is the main domestically produced rum. Seco Herrerano, a very raw white rum, is the national liquor. Seco con leche (with milk) is a common drink in the countryside.