INSIGHT GUIDES

CENTRAL AMERICA



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Inside front cover Central America
Inside back cover Guatemala City, San Salvador, Panama City

THE BEST OF CENTRAL AMERICA: TOP ATTRACTIONS



△ **The Riviera Maya**. From Cancun's resort lined hotel strip to Tulum's eco-chic vibe, some of the world's finest, softest white-sand beaches are found here, providing the setting for Mexico's biggest tourist region. See page 116.



△ **Osa Peninsula**. Wilderness, wildlife, and adventure: everything the eco-minded traveler comes to Costa Rica to find is here, located in the remotest part of the southern Pacific region with its legendary biodiversity. See page 301.

▽ **Chichén Itzá**. Declared one of the 'New Seven Wonders of the World,' this great Maya city is intensely dramatic in both style and scale. See page 113.





△ **Diving in Belize**. Part of the Mesa American reef, the world's second largest stretch of coral provides countless opportunities for diving and snorkeling, such as the famous Blue Hole and the Hol Chan Marine Reserve. See page 91.



△ **Arenal Volcano**. Picture-perfect, cone-shaped Arenal stands out as the quintessential volcano. Although it is temporarily dormant on the outside, it still supplies the geo-thermal power on the inside to heat the ever-popular hot springs. See page 292.



◁ **Panama Canal**. Cutting between the Atlantic and the Pacific, this recently expanded canal is one of the world's most strategic waterways and a marvel of modern engineering. See page 315.

▷ **Tikal**. Soaring above jungle canopy, the colossal temple-pyramids of this once powerful Maya city, which dates to the 4th century BC, seem built to an unearthly scale. See page 160.



△ **Lake Atitlán**. This exquisite highland lake in a giant *caldera* (collapsed volcano) in Guatemala's Sierra Madre is lined by laid-back towns and Maya villages with distinctive customs and shrines. See page 140.



△ **Ometepe Island**. Two volcanoes, Concepción and Maderas, connected by a low isthmus, form Lake Nicaragua's largest island, which is marked with wide beaches, petroglyphs, and rich farmland. See page 258.



▽ **Joya de Cerén**. Covered in volcanic ash and not discovered until 1976, this village in El Salvador – still being unearthed – is a Mayan Pompeii, revealing what life was like in the 6th century. See page 208.



THE BEST OF CENTRAL AMERICA: EDITOR'S CHOICE



Plumed basilisk lizard, Tortuguero National Park.

BEST WILDLIFE WATCHING

Tortuguero National Park. With a sharp-eyed guide, you'll see myriad birds, mammals, and reptiles in this labyrinth of natural jungle canals. See page 208.

Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary. One of the best-preserved, most pristine expanses of rainforest in the Americas, Belize's most important reserve is a refuge for jaguars, ocelots, and many species of birds. See page 193.

Pico Bonito National Park. Taking in both low lying tropical rainforest and mountainous cloud forest, Honduras' most impressive national park offers sublime birding, hiking, and whitewater rafting. See page 234.

Manuel Antonio National Park. Small but exquisite, this park packs a wealth of monkeys and birds into a compact jungle edged by three long arcs of white-sand beach. No wonder it's the most popular national park in Costa Rica. See page 300.

Golfo de Chiriquí. This marine reserve on Panama's Pacific Coast is the meeting point for humpback whales migrating from both Alaska and South America. See page 321.

BEST BEACHES

Nosara. Two Costa Rican beaches side by side, Playas Pelada and Guiones offer surfing, swimming, spectacular Pacific sunsets, and yoga on the beach. See page 299.

Playa El Tunco. A quick jaunt from San Salvador, this black sand beach is basecamp for famed nearby surf spots like El Sunzal and Punta Roca. See page 216.

West Bay. Though it gets busy when cruise ships come to Roatán, the calm, clear waters make West Bay the most perfect beach in the Bay Islands. See page 236.

Tulum. It may have gone jet set, but this former hippie outpost still has the white powdery sands backed by thick jungle that continues to enchant. See page123.

San Juan del Sur. A crescent-shaped bay on Nicaragua's Pacific is home to this mellow expat town with surf shacks, thatched-roof bars, and sail boats. See page 261.

Playa Venao. This remote beach on Panama's Azuero peninsula has seen a surge of new hotels, restaurants, and yoga retreats, making staying here as cushy as Panama City. See page 320.

Puerto Viejo de Talamanca. There are rastas peddling bicycles and sloths in trees in this laid back surf town near the Salsa Brava, on Costa Rica's Caribbean coast. See page 290.

Kuna Yala (San Blas) Islands, Panama. Nearly 400 postcard perfect isles in the Caribbean form the Comarca Kuna Yala, the home of the Kuna people, who have preserved their own laws, norms, and values. See page 327.

A San Blas islet.



BEST MUSEUMS



Museo de Oro, Costa Rica.

BioMuseo. Designed by starchitect Frank Gehry, this museum dedicated to biodiversity on the Amador Causeway took 15 years to build. See page 312.

Museo del Oro Pre-colombino. Central America's largest collection of pre-Columbian gold artifacts is held here, arranged to show how gold was woven into indigenous cultures. See page 282.

Museo Ixchel del Traje Indigena. Indigenous textile traditions and jewelry are explored in this massive collection that considers many of Guatemala's different cultures. See page 139.

Museo de Arte. At El Salvador's largest art museum, pay particular attention to the collection made during El Salvador's civil war. See page 211.

Museum of the Revolution. Nicaragua's Sandinista uprising of the 1970s is explored at this Leon museum though photos, documents and other artifacts. See page 253.

BEST COLONIAL CITIES AND TOWNS

Antigua. Guatemala's former colonial capital is a gracious city of ornate Baroque churches and rich and colorful traditions. See page 140.

Granada. Established in 1524, Granada is the oldest colonial city in the Americas and shares some of the Moorish architecture of its Spanish namesake. See page 255.

Comayagua. Most of the cobblestone plazas, churches, and colonial houses in this small Honduran town, once the country's capital, have been immaculately maintained. See page 228.

Suchitoto. This colonial town in the Salvadoran highlands is known for its indigo, migrating birds, and hikes to waterfalls and caves. See page 211.

Mérida. The cultural capital of the Yucatán retains its original cobblestone streets, leafy plazas, and houses with white stucco walls and courtyards. See page 110.



Vendors at Mercado de Chichicastenango.

BEST MARKETS

Mercado de Chichicastenango. Twice a week, this mountain town holds the region's biggest market. This astonishing bazaar is one of the most vivid, colorful expressions of the Highland Maya way of life. See page 148.

Mercado Central. San Salvador's crowded, chaotic market isn't just a place for exotic juices and pupusas; there are car stereos and hi-top sneakers too. See page 206.

Mercado de Mariscos. An artisanal fishing fleet from every part of Panama's Pacific Coast descends upon this market near Casco Viejo. Don't miss the ceviche vendors! See page 310.

Mercado Lucas de Galvéz. Mérida's main marketplace features a dizzying array of local foods and ingredients like *panuchos*, *queso de bola*, and *recados*. See page 110.

Mercado Municipal de Granada. A few blocks from the plaza lies this labyrinth of produce and traditional foods aimed at locals, housed in a century-old neoclassical building. See page 255.

Santa Catalina arch in Antigua.

