

BELIZE & GUATEMALA

Close your eyes and picture Central America. What do you see? Tumbling jungles, soaring temples, swinging spider monkeys? Or do you envision busy markets, a collage of cultures, and the swaying palms of a tiny Caribbean isle? Any one of those scenes is a spot-on description of Central America – which can often present a dilemma for travellers, for how can you possibly experience the region’s mélange of offerings with seven countries to choose from and about as many days to explore?

Located just south of Mexico, between the Pacific’s crashing surf to the west and the Caribbean’s sultry waters to the east, the neighboring countries of Guatemala and Belize are a microcosm of Central America’s top draws. When paired together, they boast picture-perfect colonial cities, towering ancient ruins, a medley of vibrant cultures, and vast swaths of wilderness, beach, and barrier reef—all of which can be quickly and easily accessed; transfers in this area rarely exceed a few hours. What’s more, both countries offer an impressive collection of world-class accommodation and truly bespoke experiences.

Many travellers who set out to explore this section of Central America begin their journey in the Guatemalan city of Antigua, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, home to a friendly mix of Ladinos and expats. Founded in the 16th Century and bordered by imposing volcanoes, this cosmopolitan destination features cobblestone streets, pastel-hued homes, and the melancholy but beautiful Baroque relics of churches and monasteries that were constructed by Spanish conquistadors (centuries of earthquakes have whittled away at their architectural achievements). There are smart shops and restaurants and an impressive offering of stylish boutique hotels, some of which—such as Palacio de Doña Leonor, the 16th-century home of Spanish conquistador Pedro de Alvarado’s daughter—provide a taste of the colonial city’s past. Of course, to truly understand the Antigüena personality requires doing more than just the cookie-cutter tours that guidebooks outline. “Antigua is about the people you meet,” says John Rexer, a former New York native who now runs an eclectic Antigua bar called Café No Se. “If you want to experience the soul of the city—the good, the bad, and the beautiful—you

PREVIOUS PAGE SUITE AT THE UMMAID
BHAWAN PALACE. CLOCKWISE FROM
TOP LEFT: TEGGEE SINGH TENTED
CAMEL CAMP THAR DESERT, UMMAID
BHAWAN PALACE, JODHPUR; REGGIE
SINGH INDIAN SAFARI LEOPARD,
CAMEL SAFARI THAR DESERT



MELISSA DENCHAK »

Melissa lives in Guatemala and is a member of the team who looks after our clients when they visit Central America.

have to get to know those who live here”. How do you do that? Consider learning about coffee from local farmers, setting out with a guide to find the city’s best street food (to be sure to try chuchitos, corn tamales stuffed with meat and a mild chili-tomato sauce), or visiting a “chicken bus” workshop to see how skilled mechanics transform North American school buses into the technicolor powerhouses that transport Guatemalans from place to place.

Outside Antigua, you will delight in some of Central America’s most vibrant markets. In the highland town of Chichicastenango, hundreds of vendors gather, many in traditional dress, to sell everything from wood-carved masks and ceramic pottery to boldly colored, traditional textiles. Everything’s for sale and usually at an exceptional price, especially if you possess a bit of negotiating know-how. For a more local experience, the community of San Juan Comalapa offers much the same as Chichi—albeit on a smaller scale and with nary a tourist in sight.

If you are curious about modern Maya life, a visit to Lake Atitlán in the Guatemalan highlands is a must. About a two-hour drive - or short but spectacular helicopter ride - from Antigua, it’s surrounded by verdant, rugged hills, a trio of towering

volcanoes, and a handful of indigenous villages. If it sounds spectacular, it’s because it is. Indeed, Aldous Huxley described Atitlán as “too much of a good thing”, even going so far as to compare it to Italy’s Lake Como.

Tz’utujil and Kaqchiquel Mayas have plied Atitlán’s shores for centuries and continue to do so today, wearing vibrant ropa típica (traditional clothing) and practicing age-old customs in lakeside towns. Here you can encounter the Mayan folk-saint Maxímon in the community of Santiago Atitlán, shop for hand-woven, naturally dyed textiles in the women’s cooperatives of San Juan La Laguna, or explore San Jorge La Laguna’s hillside caves, where shamans (spiritual leaders) perform elaborate ceremonies; request one of your own to experience local customs first hand.

If you spend the night at Lake Atitlán (it’s well worth one or two) will find hotels as dynamic as the area attractions. Laguna Lodge is a boutique eco-resort and nature reserve in a romantic, secluded spot; Casa Palopó offers spectacular volcano views and an equally impressive villa.

Of course, for many travellers, the famed Tikal Maya ruins are the raison d’être for a Guatemala holiday. Located in the country’s northern department of El Petén (and a quick flight from the Antigua area), this UNESCO World Heritage Site reached its heyday between 600 and 900 AD and today comprises incredible temples, ball courts, and pyramids in a wild jungle setting. It’s a breathtaking sight, though it’s certainly not the Petén region’s only spot for ruins. “The Yaxhá archaeological site is the best place to get some great photos”, says Lorena Castillo, co-owner of Ni’tun, an area eco-lodge with four private lakeside casitas. “The ruins are in a beautiful setting with great bird-watching, plus the sunset over the neighboring lagoon is incredible”. Archaeology buffs will also enjoy the ancient Maya city of Uaxactún, where it’s possible to camp in the jungle, beneath the temples and stars.



CENTRAL AMERICA

Needless to say, exploring cities, markets, and ruins can be exhausting, and that's where the English-speaking country of Belize comes in. Just a short flight from Guatemala, it is home to the world's second-largest barrier reef, hundreds of offshore cayes and atolls, and myriad thatched-roof luxury resorts where the goal is to pamper and please; some of the finest include Matachica, Turtle Inn, Casa Azul, and El Secreto.

At Ambergris Caye, the largest and most popular of Belize's isles, you can snorkel and scuba dive alongside nurse sharks, southern stingrays, and a kaleidoscope of colorful reef fish; explore the island by golf cart (it's the preferred mode of transportation); or experience the laidback Caribbean culture of neighboring Caye Caulker. Day trips to the mainland are easy to arrange and include visits to the Belize Zoo and river excursions to the Lamanai archaeology site.

A bit further south, Placencia is another top spot for R&R. This slender peninsula and village features spectacular beaches (some of the country's best), wildlife-filled mangroves, and views of the distant Maya Mountains. Here, you can settle into a perfect stretch of sand with a book and Belikin beer, visit deserted nearby cayes by kayak, or fish for tarpon, permit, or yellowfin tuna. Great trips by land include the Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary (a jaguar reserve) and the Maya ruins of Lubaantun.

For the absolute best access to Belize's fantastic barrier reef, beaches, and palm-lined islands, though, nothing tops a few days at sea on a catamaran. Chartering your own lets you set the course. "You see, experience, and do exactly what you want, when you want", says Becky Harris, a catamaran aficionado and co-owner of a Central America travel company. "If you want to fish, you can do so right off the

boat or join locals on a group expedition. You can check out tiny islands—many of which would be near-impossible to visit otherwise—stop at gorgeous beaches, or just enjoy the view from the boat's deck. Plus, there's plenty of scuba diving and snorkeling. It's like you have access to the whole Belizean coast. There's an amazing sense of freedom".

And indeed, freedom is exactly what Guatemala and Belize offer travellers curious about Central America—the freedom to get to know the region without having to see the whole of the region. You can experience many of Central America's top draws in the span of a single holiday—and while enjoying top-notch services, too. That image of Central America you pictured before? It's waiting for you, along with so much more. ☺



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Guatemala & Belize

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COSTA RICA



RACHAEL TALLENTS »

A real adventurer with a love of the great outdoors, Rachael has travelled far and wide across the globe. She loves to get away from the crowds and try new things - from river rafting in the Arctic Circle to swimming with penguins in the Galapagos and ice trekking in Patagonia. As Team Leader in our Private Travel team, Rachael has experienced many of the unique A&K experiences first hand.

A RECENT VISIT TO CENTRAL AMERICA'S TROPICAL PARADISE LEFT JET-SETTING RACHAEL TALLENTS ASKING WHY IT HADN'T BEEN TOP OF HER LIST BEFORE.

I am not sure what captivated me first; the vibrant wild orchids growing on the trees, the enchanting flutter of the hummingbirds, or the warm and genuine smiles of the local people. Maybe all three, but all I remember is that I was quickly taken within moments of arriving in Costa Rica.

I have always found the jungles of Guatemala and Belize alluring, and the Mayan cultures fascinated me from an early age. My travels through these parts of Central America have been truly magical. Without these draws, I'll admit that Costa Rica had never been up there with its neighbours in terms of temptation, and it took me years to get there. But, now that I've been, I feel so lucky to have experienced this natural and tropical piece of paradise. Located on top of the Pacific Ring of Fire, Costa Rica is home to over 300 volcanoes, of which five are active. Just like its volcanoes, Costa Rica is a country which bubbles with anticipation.

For me to really fall in love with a place, I have to feel welcome to travel and explore, and Costa Rica is one of the friendliest countries I have ever travelled to. The saying on everyone's lips - almost a salutation - is "pura vida", meaning "pure life". More than anything, it's a motto - a way of life for the Costa Ricans, symbolising their philosophy of letting your troubles go and simply enjoying life. I am not surprised that Costa Rica is considered the happiest country on earth. According to the NEF (New Economics Foundation), the Costa Ricans possess the

highest level of satisfaction in the world, and this takes into account their ecological footprint too. The people really struck me as having a huge amount of respect for their country and its landscapes. They are a people very sensitive about their environment - for instance, 99% of the country's electricity is generated from sustainable sources.

True to form, Pacuare River Lodge is an accolade to sustainable travel, and brings you close to nature with little impact. Only reachable by river raft or a bouncy dirt track, it offers an authentic, rural experience. There are just 16 river-facing cabanas, with stunning views and a delightful sense of privacy; you hear the sweet sounds of the jungle without any modern interruptions. Many of the staff members are from the local village, but they must have been trained by an absolute master. The service ethic is up there with the best. Pacuare is one of my favorite places in Latin America, incredibly natural and rustic, yet with second-to-none attention to detail; each evening, somebody lit hundreds of tea lights at dusk, creating a magical walk back to the cabana.

As part of the land bridge between North and South America, Costa Rica is a melting pot of both continents, and it has remained one of the most bio-diverse countries on the planet. With around 115 species of fish, 250 species of reptile and amphibian, 215 species of mammal, and 560 species of bird, the claims that it is a nature lover's nirvana are true.

One of my favourite moments was at dawn one day in Tortuguero National Park on the Caribbean Coast, an ethereal time when with the sun's energy initiates the sweet chattering of birds, and the grumpy monkeys emerge from deep slumber. It was then that I had a glimpse of a charismatic scarlet macaw, with the most beautiful gold chest. Catching his eye as we floated past, I was transfixed, but I was quickly awoken from his spell by a dear little rain frog - perhaps the size of my thumb - which came to join me on the beach. It was then that I realised the value of taking in the whole experience - not just the big and the beautiful but the small and in many cases microscopic things which are part of this dynamic ecosystem. Begin to appreciate them, and Costa Rica really comes to life.

As much as I love nature, and could while away days, weeks, even months watching the unique species that fascinated me, I also love adventure and excitement - and Costa Rica offers both in spades. This great country is ideal for those who like to get their hearts pounding.

Zip lining through the canopies and screaming with joy is very good fun, as are river rafting on grade five rapids, scuba diving with hammerheads sharks, surfing some of the best breaks in the Pacific and horseriding through breathtaking mountain landscapes. Costa Rica is just a thrill for all the senses, with a pristine and fruitful landscape. Far from being overshadowed by its neighbours, it complements and contrasts them, and I'm excited to continue discovering its many draws as soon as time allows.

Experience the highlights of Costa Rica on a 10 day journey from £2,345 per person including flights, accommodation on B&B basis, tours and transfers. To speak with a specialist, please call 0845 485 1137