

CENTRAL AMERICA'S INSIDER SECRETS

Think Costa Rica's just about wildlife? Convinced Mexico is the only place with Maya ruins? Explore beyond the obvious with our specialists to discover so much more...

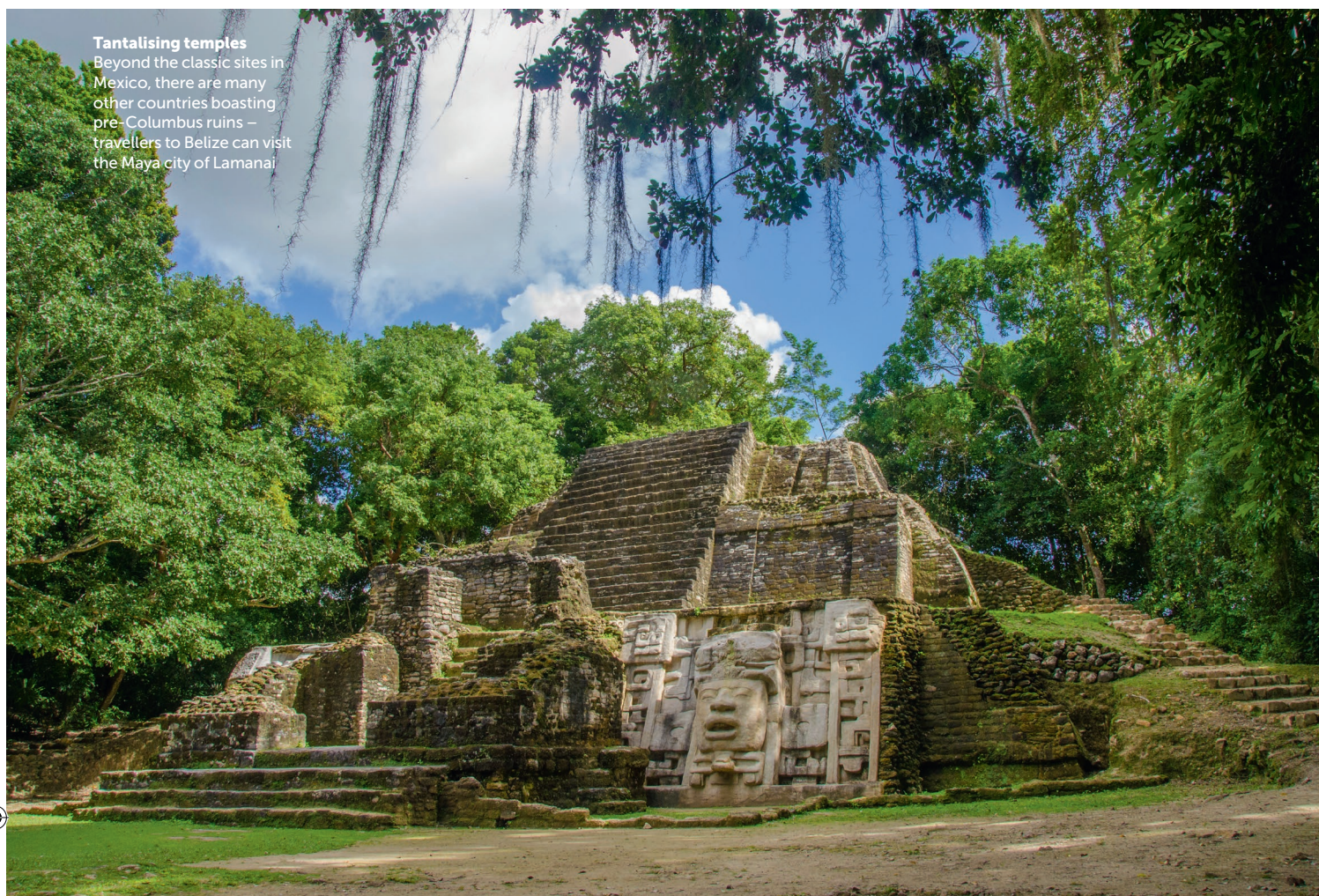




Colonial colors
Surrounded by
stunning scenery, the
Mexican city of
Guanajuato is full of
colorful buildings and
cobblestone streets

Tantalising temples

Beyond the classic sites in Mexico, there are many other countries boasting pre-Columbus ruins – travellers to Belize can visit the Maya city of Lamanai



"MEXICO ISN'T THE ONLY PLACE TO SEE EXTRAORDINARY ANCIENT RUINS"

By Carolyn Ransome



Central America was at one time home to some of the most advanced civilisations in the world, and exploring the remnants of a vast Aztec or Maya city is usually top of many travellers' lists when planning a trip to the region. The first place that often springs to mind is Chichén Itzá in Mexico, and rightly so. Marvelling at the towering pyramid of El Castillo, the largest ancient ball court in the Americas, the thousand columns and vast cenotes, is certainly the highlight of many trips to Mexico. However, there are many other impressive Maya sites dotted around Central America that attract far fewer crowds.

In northern Guatemala you could find yourself walking through the jungle discovering the crumbling ruins of Yaxha, located in between two lakes where, underneath the lush vegetation, archaeologists are still uncovering ancient foundations below the watchful gaze of the

howler monkeys. Or visit its neighbour, the magnificent Tikal, where the tops of the temples peek through treetops and colourful toucans dart overhead.

Cross the border into Belize and into the Chiquibul Forest and you'll find one of the largest sites in the Maya world. Caracol has enormous temples rising up from the jungle floor and many more hidden underneath it. Another lesser-known gem is Lamanai, also in Belize, which sits proudly close to the banks of the New River, with a dense backdrop of tropical forest. Here, you can marvel at the intricate carvings on the wall of the Mask Temple. The pure solitude created by its peaceful surroundings really transport you back to what this site may have been like in its Maya heyday.

Get me there: Tailor-made trips to Mexico, including time at Chichén Itzá, start from \$2,375pp. Alternatively, trips taking in the Maya sites in Guatemala or Belize start from \$3,210. For more information, please contact the Central America team at **1-855-838-8600**.

"THERE IS WONDERFUL WILDLIFE BEYOND COSTA RICA"

By Ali Andino



Despite its tiny size, Costa Rica is one of the most biologically diverse places on Earth, with 25% of the country consisting of protected national park. Its rainforests, cloudforests, mangroves and volcanic central highlands create countless delicate ecosystems, which are home to over half a million species.

The tropical rainforests are alive during the day with monkeys playing in the canopies and sloths curled up in the treetops, but I also recommend a guided nature walk after dark when you can spot a variety of colourful frogs, insects and sleeping birds. I was lucky enough to spy an ocelot on a night hike through the rainforest in Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí on my last trip. The remote Osa Peninsula hosts the greatest concentration and diversity of species in the whole country, including five species of monkey, scarlet macaws, and also some more elusive creatures such as tapirs, anteaters and the harpy eagle.

While Costa Rica is indeed one of the world's prime wildlife destinations, there are other superb experiences in Central America not to be missed, allowing nature lovers to return here time and again.

A notable highlight is the opportunity to see grey whales remarkably close up in Baja California, Mexico. They arrive in great numbers to calve in the region's lagoons between January and March, and we know the best places to spot them – with fewer crowds. Birdwatchers who have already thoroughly explored the cloudforests of Costa Rica may enjoy a visit to Panama's Soberanía National Park, which runs alongside Gatún Lake and the Panama Canal. Renowned in the birding world, the dense tropical forests here attract an astonishing number of birds, with over 300 species recorded in a single day by the Audubon society. A visit here promises excellent sightings of trogons, tanagers, antbirds, cuckoos and manakins among many others.

Get me there: Tailor-made trips to Costa Rica, including time in the Osa Peninsula, start from \$3,830pp. Alternatively, whale watching trips to Mexico start from \$4,790pp. Trips to

Panama, including birdwatching, start from \$4,130pp. For more information, please contact the Central America team at **1-855-838-8600**.

"CENTRAL AMERICA'S CITIES AREN'T JUST TIMELESS CHURCHES & COBBLESTONE STREETS"

By Daniel Hancock



The Spanish conquest of the Americas has inevitably left its mark on many cities in Central America, with their arrival

bringing about the fervent construction of churches and monasteries as well as colonial houses and traditional 'plazas' (main squares), which became the focal point for many towns. Exploring the cobbled streets of these colonial towns and cities transports you back to another era, and one of my favourite places to absorb this architecture and atmosphere is Antigua in Guatemala.

At one time one of the richest of the New World capitals, Antigua's historic centre is remarkably well-preserved and its grid system, dotted with leafy plazas, is a delight to explore. Guatemala's capital was moved to present-day Guatemala City in the 1700s, meaning Antigua does not suffer from the



congestion and pollution of other capitals and its backdrop of mist-shrouded volcanoes only adds to its charm. Particularly impressive is the Fuego Volcano, and if it is in an active phase during the time of your visit, I highly recommend heading up to one of Antigua's roof terraces by day or night to get a glimpse of the plumes of smoke or spluttering lava.

While it is true that many Central American capitals have traditional colonial architecture in common, to say they are all the same is very far from the truth. Take Costa Rica's capital of San José as an



Reaching for the sky
A grey whale calf breaches in Baja California, Mexico; (above) the stately Santa Catalina Arch in Antigua

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example. Yes, there are churches and some interesting buildings but, through modern development, the city today is more of a working, vibrant commercial hub. Panama City is an example that lies somewhere between the two. Within the city you have the characterful Casco Viejo district, filled with monuments, churches and magnificent colonial architecture interspersed with dilapidated buildings awaiting their chance to shine again. In contrast, across the bay is the city's Financial District, dotted with towering skyscrapers competing for space – a contrast of modern and old standing across from each other.

Admiring the twinkling lights of the financial city, I cannot help but think back to one of my earlier travelling adventures in Hong Kong. Add to this the opportunity to marvel at the astonishing feat of engineering that is the Panama Canal and you have the perfect mix of both old and new.

Get me there: Tailor-made trips to Guatemala, including time to explore the colonial architecture in Antigua, start from \$2,815pp. Alternatively, trips to Panama with time to explore the city start from \$3,200pp. For more information, please contact the Central America team at **1-855-838-8600**.



Just add water...
Rafting the Pacuare River in Costa Rica; (below) Panama City's Financial District

"OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES IN CENTRAL AMERICA AREN'T JUST FOR THRILLSEEKERS"

By Janie Oates



Central America, with its spectacular volcanoes, tropical jungles and misty cloudforests, is a playground for adventure lovers and an amazing place to get your adrenaline fix. Costa Rica is an obvious choice to try some of these activities, with a great variety on offer and a commitment to safety and responsible tourism making the experience an enjoyable one. The Arenal Volcano is a well-established activity hub, and here you can experience the thrill of zip-lining as you zoom high above the rainforest canopy, enjoying spectacular views across to Lake Arenal.

But there are so many other ways to enjoy the beautiful landscapes and environments of Costa Rica without any fear factor or even intense physical exertion involved. Take a leisurely guided stroll through a misty cloudforest or along canopy walkways and bridges to spot different species of flora and fauna. Try some gentle rafting, where you will float slowly

through the jungle scenery, then take a swim and spot wildlife from the river. At the end of the day, enjoy a relaxing soak in the thermal hot springs surrounded by lush forest and volcanic views.

Belize is also a soft adventure hub, with its caves a particular attraction. The more adventurous will be drawn to the cave of Actun Tunichil Muknal, where an exhilarating jungle hike is followed by swimming and occasional scrambling on your hands and knees through narrow cave pools and chambers to uncover the secrets of this attraction. For something a little gentler you can take a slow-paced canoe trip from Barton Creek, navigated by a guide who will point out the glittering stalactites, stalagmites and crystal formations adorning the cave's interior – all with minimum exertion required.

Get me there: Tailor-made trips to Costa Rica, including time in Arenal, start from \$3,220pp. Alternatively, trips to Belize start from \$2,750pp. For more information, please contact the Central America team at **1-855-838-8600**.





Through the lens
 Busy market streets of Puebla; (below) colorful buildings line the city center in Guanajuato

"MEXICO ISN'T JUST BEAUTIFUL BEACHES & AUTHENTIC CUISINE"

By Scott Harrington



Mexico has long been renowned for its cuisine and stretches of seemingly always-sunny beaches.

However, beyond the incredible whale-watching in Baja California and the bright turquoise sea in the Mayan Riviera lies a country steeped in captivating history.

I just returned from a trip focusing specifically on the colonial cities in the north of Mexico, and I was fascinated by the amazing cultural diversity and the vital significance these cities played in the fight for independence in the early 19th century.

The historical value of these cities can be seen everywhere, from the fine mural work of artists like Orozco and Rivera to the finely restored colonial streets and plazas.

A great starting point for any historical tour of Mexico is Puebla, one of the oldest colonial cities on the continent. Founded in 1531 by Spanish conquerors, Puebla's original cultural charm can be seen proudly on display throughout the city, especially at its Spanish-style historic center, which was designated a UNESCO world heritage site in 1987.

Beyond Puebla, the city of Queretaro will delight you with its colonial architecture. While the area has continued its rapid development into a booming city through a great deal of commercial investment, it has managed to preserve its historic downtown.

One of my favorite stops on my colonial tour of Mexico was Guanajuato. The bright hues of the historic houses lining the cobblestone streets create an exciting visual spectacle, and exploring the city on foot promises at least a few encounters with street artists and outdoor performers. There are also great panoramic views to be had from the Monumento al Pipila – a monument dedicated to Guanajuato's hero of its Independence.

Oaxaca is another city well known for its history, especially the splendid Zapotec ruins and traditional villages. It was founded by the Spanish in 1521 and declared a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1987. The city has done a good job of maintaining its roots, best spotted in the colonial architecture of its beautiful city center. Exploring Oaxaca – and most of the colonial cities of Mexico – is especially fantastic because of the lack of tourism in these areas. This is the ideal area to explore what feels like the authentic Mexico.

Get me there: Tailor-made trips to Mexico, including time in Puebla, Oaxaca and Guanajuato, start from \$4,005pp. For more information, contact our Mexico specialists at **1-855-838-8670**.



Further reading: Order a copy of our brand new Central America brochure by visiting our website or call **1-855-838-8670**.

