

Pre-Departure Guide: *Central America*





Welcome to Central America

Thank you for choosing to travel with Aurora Expeditions. We hope that you are as excited about your trip as we are!

Aurora Expeditions has prepared this guide containing some important information, hints and reminders to help you best prepare for your travels in Central America. This guide includes information ranging from the type of climate and weather you can expect, to visa requirements, local currency, health and safety, and even a few shopping tips.

Sustainable Tourism

At Aurora Expeditions we try to encourage our travellers to practice sustainable tourism whenever possible. It is important to remember that many of the places you will visit may not have the same infrastructure as what you are used to in your home country. As tourism to these destinations increases, so does the strain on local water and power supplies and other resources.

We encourage you to take short showers, turn lights off when leaving your hotel room, minimise waste and if you plan to hike, make sure that you take a bag for your rubbish with you. Please also remember that ecosystems in Central America are extremely delicate. Please keep to the hiking trails and do not damage or take any plants, seeds, cuttings or flowers. If you are snorkelling or diving, please do not touch or disturb the coral.

Central American people are proud of their culture and ancestry. Although they are now accustomed to international tourists, each area continues to maintain its identity and culture. Generally, most Central Americans dress conservatively and we recommend that you wear trousers, knee-length shorts and skirts and long-sleeved shirts to minimise any potential for offence, especially when entering religious or culturally sensitive sites.

Aurora Expeditions' ground operators employ local guides and use hotels that employ people from the local community. We also ensure that the majority of the food supplied on our tours is locally sourced. We do this to maximise economic benefit to the community and to ensure we minimise the carbon footprint of the places we visit (i.e. the food does not need to be transported long distances).

Entrance Requirements and Visas

Visa requirements vary from country to country in Central America, and can also depend on which country the visitor is from. We therefore recommend that you check with each Central American country embassy or consulate in your country of residence for the most up-to-date visa requirements of the countries you will be visiting.

If you need to transit en route to your final destination, please also check and ensure that a visa or some other form of visa waiver authorisation (such as an electronic Travel Authorization or eTA) is not required for the country through which you will be transiting. Countries such as Canada require an eTA from certain nationalities even if they are only transiting through Canada en route to another destination.

Clients are responsible for obtaining valid travel documents and complying with customs and other regulations of the country to which they are travelling. Aurora Expeditions does not accept responsibility for any problems associated with obtaining these documents. We recommend carrying a photocopy of your passport at all times during your travels.

Please note that in several Central American countries a Reciprocity Tax or entrance fee is charged to passengers at the airport on arrival. These are subject to change at any time.

Please note that other countries may charge fees without warning and these will be payable locally at the airport or land border crossing.

Some airports also charge an airport usage fee or embarkation fee that is not included in your ticket price.

All taxes and entrance fees are subject to change, and clients accept this as part of travel in Central America. Aurora Expeditions cannot be held responsible for these charges.

Disclaimer: While Aurora Expeditions will assist to obtain any necessary visas, we are not a consular service and it is the sole responsibility of the traveller to check and to obtain the necessary visas before departing your country of residence.



Passport

Make sure your passport is valid for at least six months after the date you intend to return to your country of residence. The passport validity date varies from one country to the next, but generally a minimum of six months validity from your date of return is applicable.

Your passport is a valuable document and attractive to criminals who may try to use your identity to commit crimes. Always keep it in a safe place. Be aware of attempts to obtain access to your passport by deception. If you are forced to hand over your passport, contact your embassy immediately for advice.

Vaccinations and Health Information

Aurora Expeditions recommends that you visit your GP or a travel medical centre for advice on the required vaccinations but as a guide, we recommend the following:

- Yellow fever – especially for tropical and sub-tropical areas
- Hepatitis – both A and B (Twinrix®)
- Typhoid
- Diphtheria
- Cholera
- Rabies
- Tetanus

Further information

The following websites give further health advice and information on travelling to Central America:

<http://www.traveldoctor.com.au>

<http://travelvaccines.com.au/index.php/south-america>

<https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/destinations/list/>

You may have already have been vaccinated against some of these as part of a childhood immunisation program. Please check with your doctor as you may require a booster shot.

Yellow fever is a viral illness spread by the bite of the mosquito. It is endemic in some tropical and sub-tropical regions of Central America, although cases of tourists contracting the disease are rare. Aurora Expeditions recommends that you carry your vaccination certificate with you as you travel in Central America as you may be asked for evidence of vaccination upon arrival or departure at some airports.

People travelling to Central America from South America are also required to be vaccinated against yellow fever. If returning to your home country from Central America, you may be required to be vaccinated against yellow fever.

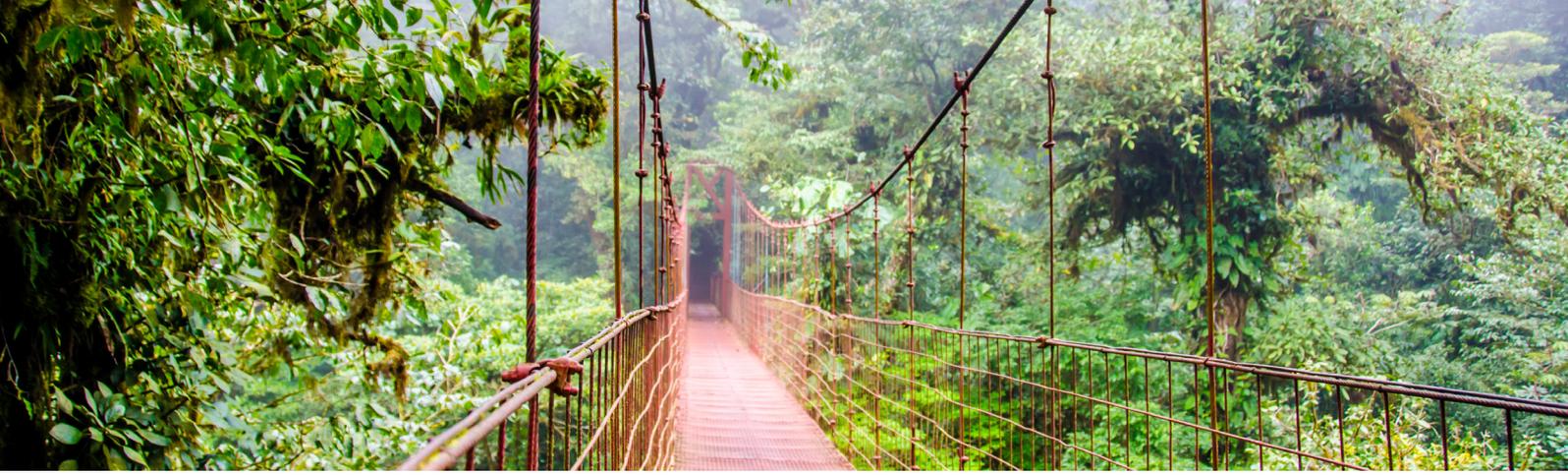
A single yellow fever vaccine is considered to provide lifetime immunity and countries cannot require visitors to be vaccinated again at entry except in certain circumstances, such as entering an area experiencing ongoing outbreaks or travelling for a prolonged period in an area where yellow fever is endemic.

Please consult your GP or a specialist travel doctor for more information on vaccinations.

It is every traveller's responsibility to have the required vaccinations. Aurora Expeditions will not be held responsible for travel delays or refused entry into countries due to travellers not having been vaccinated.

When travelling to tropical and sub-tropical areas, please exercise caution and carry sufficient insect repellent, cover your arms and legs by wearing light-coloured, long-sleeve tops and pants to help prevent mosquito bites.

Please consult your GP or a specialist travel doctor regarding whether anti-malarial medication is appropriate.



Packing Essentials

What you pack will depend on when and where you are travelling and the types of activities included in your itinerary. The following should act as a useful checklist of essential items:

Documents

- Passport – ensure that it is valid, in good condition with empty pages available
- Photocopy of passport
- Travel insurance – ensure that it will be valid for the entire journey
- Vaccination certificate
- Photographs of the contents of your luggage, particularly special/expensive items such as cameras, laptops and tablets etc
- Passport photos for identification passes and certain overseas visas
- Airline tickets and itinerary
- Foreign currency and/or debit/credit cards
- Debit/credit card cancellation phone numbers
- Emergency contact numbers

Clothes, First Aid

- Waterproof day pack for excursions and landings
- Money belt – ensure that it is discreet and comfortable to wear
- Basic first-aid kit – band-aids/bandages, anti-diarrhoea remedy, paracetamol/aspirin, re-hydration remedy, antiseptic cream/powder, sterile dressing
- Sea sickness medication
- Personal medication – we recommend carrying this in your hand luggage at all times
- Moisturiser for wind and/or sunburn
- Waterproof sunscreen and lip balm
- Sunglasses and sun hat

- Mosquito spray and insect repellent
- Comfortable walking shoes and sandals
- Wet landing shoes - A pair of reef shoes, velcro sandals or old walking shoes that you are prepared to throw away are all ideal. These are essential for wet landings. Please note that bare feet or flip flops are not permitted for safety reasons.
- Long-sleeved top and full-length trousers – protection against mosquitoes at dawn and dusk and the sun throughout the day
- Lightweight and light-coloured clothing
- Spray Jacket - For Zodiac cruises and transfers. Sea or weather conditions (choppy water or cool mornings/evenings) make it necessary to wear a waterproof spray jacket.
- Warm clothing (depending on itinerary and time of year)
- Dry bag or plastic bag for camera
- Water bottle - Aurora Expeditions will provide you with a water bottle on board. Remember to fill it up and take it with you on each landing
- Swimsuit
- Binoculars for wildlife viewing from ship and in national parks
- Camera with spare battery and memory cards
- Laptop for image processing and other data use
- USB stick to share photos with fellow travellers
- Padlock with security or smart code
- International power adaptor
- Voltage converter
- Power board for charging multiple devices
- Small torch
- Refillable water bottle for onshore excursions
- External hard drive for storing downloaded images
- Spare pair of prescription glasses or contact lenses
- Ear plugs (especially if you are sharing a cabin)



Additional Spending Money

Prices can vary greatly in Central America. The following is a rough guide to help you estimate your spending money for each day. Although each country in Central America has its own currency, we have chosen to provide our guide in US dollars for convenience.

Belize: Approximately \$20–30

Costa Rica: Approximately \$50–60

Guatemala: Approximately \$25–35

Honduras: Approximately \$20–30

Mexico: Approximately \$40–50

Nicaragua: Approximately \$10–20

Panama: Approximately \$20–30

Cuba: Approximately \$30–40

Note: These amounts should only be used as a guide and your actual travel costs will depend on your travel style, tastes and personal budget.

Tipping Guidelines

Called a propina in Spanish, a tip in Central America is generally given to reward good service but is not mandatory. If you feel a particular local guide, driver, waiter or host has provided excellent service, offering a tip will be greatly appreciated. As a general guide, we recommend tipping 10 per cent of the bill for restaurants, US\$5–15 per day for a local tour guide and US\$2–5 per day for drivers. Generally, tipping is not required for airport transfer services.

Shopping and Bargaining Tips

Anything from local handicrafts to designer clothing can be bought in Central America and generally at a lower cost than your home country. Gold and silver are also very affordable, particularly in Peru. Please be aware that items made of wood may contain insects and seeds and therefore be subject to strict quarantine laws, including confiscation at the airport upon your return home.

Bargaining, or haggling, is common in Central America and is expected in markets and small shops. As a rule, when bargaining, start off asking for half of what the original price is and work your way up. Have a price in mind that you are happy to pay and aim for that.

Bargaining should always be conducted in a fun and lighthearted way, never aggressively. Both parties should be happy at the end of the process. Do not start negotiating unless you are serious about buying an item. You may need to haggle for anything from a souvenir to a taxi fare, but never for food. Please ask your local guide for a few tips!

On many of our shore excursions we try to take travellers to local markets rather than the expensive tourist-oriented bazaars. Local markets have a higher level of locally made products and allow you to give something back to the local community, rather than to a middle man.

Electrical Outlets in Central America

Most countries in Central America use the European style outlet that delivers 110 volts. Visit the website below for more information on each country: <http://electricaloutlet.org>



Personal Safety in Central America

Most Central American countries have now recognised that tourism plays an important part in their economies and governments have taken great steps in the last few years to change Central America's poor safety image. There are a lot more police, especially plain-clothes officers, in the towns and cities most frequented by tourists.

Here are some tips to minimise risks to personal safety:

- Learn some basic terms in Spanish before you arrive in Central America. Do not expect that everyone will speak English
- Read the guide books and talk with other travellers to find out which areas are best avoided
- When taking a taxi from an airport to your hotel, travel in the more expensive airport taxi and ensure that the drivers have official identification. Never take a taxi waiting outside the airport grounds. Better still, book your airport transfer prior to departure so that you have peace of mind knowing that you will be met on arrival
- Travel in a group whenever possible and avoid going alone to remote areas where tourists would not be expected to go
- If travelling solo, avoid becoming intoxicated. When leaving nightclubs/bars/discos late at night take a taxi home no matter how close your hostel or hotel is
- Seek local advice from your hotel staff or take a guide
- Leave your valuables locked in the safe in your hotel room, or keep them hidden when you are out in public
- Although assaults are rare, theft is much more common. Thieves are experts at making the most of a good opportunity such as a momentary lapse in a tourist's

concentration. Long bus trips, crowded streets and packed trains are their territory. We do not recommend that you avoid these places because you cannot; however, vigilance and common sense should always prevail.

- On long bus journeys, your luggage will normally be stowed in the external luggage compartment. Ask for a receipt for your bags and keep an eye out each time the bus stops to ensure your bags are not off-loaded accidentally
- If the pavements are really crowded, especially in market areas, walk on the road. Bag slashing is rare these days but for added safety, you can wear your day pack on your chest. If wearing it on your back, try to walk without stopping
- Avoid putting your bag down on the floor to take a photo. At cafés, always keep your bag on your lap

If you are unfortunate enough to be robbed during your travels, try not to let it ruin your holiday as most things can be replaced in Central America. Make sure that you have travel insurance and that you have read the small print before arriving in Central America so that you know what is covered and how to make a claim successfully.

Insurance

Please note travel insurance is mandatory on all Aurora Expeditions' trips. We recommend SureSave, which specialises in travel insurance, offering worldwide assistance. SureSave provides world-class, Australian-based assistance through their customer service, claims and emergency assistance teams. SureSave is underwritten by 'underwriters at Lloyds – one of the world's largest specialist insurance markets providing services to businesses in over 200 countries and territories.'



Costa Rica - General Information

Population: approximately 4.9 million

Capital: San José

History

Costa Rica (Rich Coast) is a country blessed with abundant nature, pristine beaches and immense biodiversity but what really makes this small diverse country a special place where you will always desire to return to, is its people. 'Ticos' as Costa Ricans are commonly called, are open-minded, diverse, polite, humble, hospitable, hardworking and highly educated. Costa Ricans are people proud of their culture and of the extraordinary natural richness that surrounds them. They are persistent in their religious convictions and very family oriented.

Ticos are predominantly the direct descendants of Spanish colonists. Fortunately, Costa Rica was the most 'neglected' of colonial Central America because of the absence of mineral wealth (gold and silver) and an abundant indigenous population. Colonists arriving in Costa Rica were not looking for minerals or to exploit indigenous labour, but rather, a place to work and settle with their families.



Costa Rica is a peaceful nation that has always avoided conflict and military action. The calm nature of Ticos is the result of a peaceful history with a long democratic tradition. Costa Rico is considered a progressive nation because it has more teachers than policemen; more biological reserves than cities and an endless dedication to social programs.

With the establishment of a free education system as a constitutional right in 1869, the elimination of the death penalty in 1882 and the dissolution of the national army in 1948, it is clear that social development and order are the cornerstone of Costa Rica's culture.

Economy

Costa Rica has a stable economy and a relatively high standard of living. A rapidly expanding tourism industry contributes significantly to the nation's economy, along with agriculture and the export of electronic components.

The country's major economic resources are its fertile land, highly-educated population and its strategic location in the Central American isthmus, which provides easy access to North and South American markets and direct ocean access to the European and Asian continents. A quarter of Costa Rica's land is dedicated to national reserved forests, often adjoining picturesque beaches, making it a popular destination for affluent retirees and eco-tourists.



Nature and Wildlife

Covering only 50,660 square kilometres – 0.03 per cent of the Earth’s surface, Costa Rica contains an astonishing number of plant and animal species, approximately six per cent of the world’s biodiversity – greater than Europe or North America. This abundance of flora and fauna is partly due to the country’s geographical position on a land bridge between North and South America and its environmental conservation policies.

Scientists from all over the world are drawn to Costa Rica to study the country’s complex rainforest ecosystems, where a hectare might be home nearly 100 species of trees. These trees are habitat for more than 9,000 recorded species of plants including 1,500 species of orchids. Over 850 species of birds fly over Costa Rica’s rainforests – far more than in North America, Europe or Australia, including 50 species of hummingbird, 15 species of parrot (including the exotic scarlet macaw), six toucan species, 45 species of tanagers, 29 antbird species and the resplendent quetzal with its shimmering green plumage, among others.

More than 200 mammal species have been recorded in Costa Rica: howler and spider monkeys, white-faced capuchin and squirrel monkey, sloths, anteaters, armadillos, agoutis, coatis, peccaries (wild pigs), kinkajous, raccoons, squirrels and bats as well as endangered species like jaguars and tapirs. For butterfly enthusiasts, more than 2,000 species (approximately 10 per cent of the world’s species) are found in Costa Rica.

Approximately 150 species of amphibians call Costa Rica home, including colourful species such as red-eye leaf frog, spotted-thighed poison frog and the strawberry poison-arrow frog. Over 200 species of reptiles including snakes, lizards, crocodiles and 14 turtle species – including the huge leatherback, Olive Ridley, loggerhead and the hawksbill, also inhabit the country.

Time Zone

Costa Rica is in Greenwich Meantime (GMT) zone GMT-6.

Money

The currency of Costa Rica is the Costa Rican Colón (CRC). Using credit or debit cards at an ATM are the recommended way to access funds while travelling in Costa Rica.

Most public banks are open from 9.00 am to 3.00 pm Monday to Friday. Private banks are usually open until 6.00 pm. Most public and private banks are open for limited hours on weekends.

Please check websites such as www.oanda.com or www.xe.com for up to date exchange rates prior to your departure.

Long Distance Dialling, Emergency Numbers

Country code: +506

Ambulance: 128

Police: 117

Fire: 118

Emergencies: 911

Climate

Costa Rica is a diverse country and so is its climate. Costa Rican weather can offer unexpected surprises. The temperature in Costa Rica is closely related to land elevation. The low-lying Pacific coast is generally very hot and dry; however, during the rainy season, it is common to have rain in the afternoon and occasionally a cloudy, humid day.

In contrast, the Caribbean climate zone, which includes Tortuguero, Arenal, Puerto Viejo and Sarapiquí, is warm and humid nearly all year round and has less distinguishable rainy and dry seasons. There are 12 hours of sunlight each day. The sun typically rises around 5.45 am and sets around 5.45 pm. The average temperature in Costa Rica is 24.4°C.

Cuisine

Costa Rican cuisine is generally quite healthy and balanced and based on fresh meats and vegetables, herbs and light spices. Food is similar to Mexican and not particularly spicy, as many travellers expect. Rice and beans are the basic ingredient in almost all Costa Rican cuisine. A typical meal is the *casado*, the name referring to the eternal 'marriage' of its ingredients. It consists of rice and beans, meat or fish, fried plantains and a cabbage with tomato salad.

For breakfast, it is common to be served a hearty dish of black beans and rice (called *gallo pinto*) seasoned with onions and peppers, accompanied by fried eggs, sour cream and corn tortillas.

Fruits found in Costa Rica include papaya, mango, pineapple (*piña*), watermelon (*sandía*), cantaloupe or rockmelon (*melón*), blackberries (*moras*), lemons (*limones*), guava (*guayaba*), passionfruit (*granadilla*) and avocados (*aguacates*). Many of these are served plain or as a *refresco*, a blended drink with ice.

Vegetables are mostly used in soups and stews. Corn is one of the most popular vegetables and is used to prepare tortillas and corn pancakes. Corn on the cob is sometimes roasted (*elote asado*), or boiled (*elote cocinado*). *Empanadas* are corn turnovers filled with beans, cheese and maybe potatoes and meat. *Guiso de maíz* is a corn and chayote (vegetable pear) stew.

Olla de carne is a delicious stew made with beef, potatoes, carrots, chayote, plantains and yucca. *Sopa negra* is a simple soup made with black beans. The hearty *sopa de mondongo* is made with tripe and vegetables.

The plantain, which has the appearance of a large banana, cannot be eaten raw. It is sweet and delicious when fried or baked and will often accompany most meals. When sliced thinly and deep fried, the plantain becomes a crunchy snack similar to the potato chip.

Fresh seafood is more readily available near the coast or in San José. San José's fish of choice is sea bass (*corvina*) or mahi-mahi (*dorado*). A common appetiser, *ceviche* is a dish of raw fish marinated in lemon juice with coriander (*cilantro*) and onions.

The Caribbean coast has its own unique cuisine. Dishes usually include coconut milk and spices like ginger and curry. Grated coconut is used in many desserts and cakes. The *patí* is a spicy meat pie resembling a turnover. *Rondon* ('rundown') is a fish soup containing plantains, breadfruit, peppers and spices.

Costa Rican Coffee

Costa Rica's coffee crop is consistently among the world's best. The Central Valley, with its altitude and mineral-rich volcanic soil, is the ideal place for growing coffee. Coffee has been named 'El Grano de Oro' (The Golden Bean) for the economic prosperity it has brought to Costa Rica. Over the last 100 years, coffee has transformed Costa Rica from a colonial backwater into a relatively affluent and cosmopolitan republic.

Costa Rica's founding families owned the largest plantations, creating a 'coffee oligarchy'. Attracted by the prospect of work on the plantations, hundreds of families emigrated from Europe and the Americas between the end of 1800s and the early 1900s, and were given land in exchange for their labour. These families formed the basis of the largest democratic middle class in all Central America.

The first coffee exported by Costa Rica was to Colombia in 1820. In 1842, coffee planters shipped their coffee directly to England for the first time. European coffee connoisseurs soon recognised Costa Rican coffee as one of the world's finest. More importantly, this recognition gave Costa Rica access to Europe's wealth. The face of this once sleepy little 'rich coast' was now changing. This economic prosperity enabled the country to build most of the nation's landmarks. The first railroad was constructed in 1890 allowing access to the Atlantic coast for the first time. In 1897, the inhabitants of San José were able to attend the memorable inauguration of the National Theatre, the construction of which was paid for by the coffee and banana farmers who desired to have well-known European opera singers perform locally.

Language

Costa Rica is a Spanish-speaking country, although English is often taught in schools and used widely in business circles. All official documents issued by the Costa Rican government are in Spanish. Other native languages still

Spoken by indigenous people include: Bribri, Maleku, Ngäbe, Guaymí and Cabecar. Creole-English language (or *Mekatelyu*) is spoken on the Caribbean coast.

National Holidays

New Year's Day, Juan Santamaría Day, Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter Sunday, Labour Day, Guanacaste Day, Lady of Los Angeles Day, Mother's Day, Independence Day, Cultural Day, Christmas Day.



Cuba - General Information

Population: approximately 11.5 million

Capital: Havana

Cuba is a wonderful mix of cultures, landscapes, rhythms and traditions. Bathed by the warm Caribbean Sea currents, Cuba's climate splendidly complements the beautiful beaches around the island and adjacent cays. Powdery white-sand beaches, crystal clear waters and a world-famous marine environment enriched by coral reefs, make Cuba an ideal destination for those who looking for a tropical beach holiday filled with water-based activities.

Cuba is an archipelago comprising 4,195 cays, islets, small islands and a main island, the biggest in the Caribbean and Antilles area. The country's topography consists of three large mountain ranges: Sierra de los Órganos in the west; the Sierra del Escambray in the centre; and the Sierra Maestra in the east. Its nearest neighbours are: Haiti, 77 kilometres east; Yucatan Peninsula, 210 kilometres west; the Florida Peninsula, 180 kilometres to the north, and Jamaica, 140 kilometres to the south.

History

Early Cuba

The first European to reach Cuba was Christopher Columbus in 1492. At that time Cuba was an agrarian society where the indigenous people grew cassava, maize and yams. They also smoked tobacco. In 1511, Diego Velasquez conquered the island of Cuba and founded several settlements, including Havana. Wiped out by the diseases the Europeans brought with them, the indigenous inhabitants offered little resistance and from 1526, the Spanish imported African slaves into Cuba as labour for the sugar industry. The struggle for Cuban independence began in 1868 when a landowner named Carlos Manuel de Céspedes freed his slaves, which started the Ten Years War. In 1886, slavery was abolished in Cuba.

The Second War of Independence began in 1895. In 1898, US forces invaded Cuba in support of its quest for independence. A peace treaty forced Spain to give control of Cuba to the US. After the invasion, Cuba was occupied by US forces for nearly four years. In 1902, Cuba became independent but in reality, the country was still a US protectorate.

During the early 20th century most people in Cuba were still very poor despite efforts to modernise the country. In 1924, Gerardo Machado was elected president of Cuba. The constitution barred him from more than one term but when his term ended in 1928, Machado held on to power. Machado was overthrown in 1933 and later, after a period of unrest, Cuba had a new and democratic constitution and elections were held.

In 1952, Fulgencio Batista staged a coup in Cuba and became its dictator. At that time, compared to other Central American countries, Cuba was prosperous and its people had a relatively high standard of living. Literacy rates were high, healthcare was relatively good and because education in Cuba was of a high standard, Cuba was well-known for its writers including: Alejo Carpentier, Guillermo Cabrera Infante, Reinaldo Arenas, Leonardo Padura, Pedro Juan Gutiérrez, Virgilio Piñera and Carilda Oliver Labra.

Communist Cuba

In 1959, Fidel Castro led a revolution in Cuba and installed himself as the country's new leader. Castro introduced a repressive communist regime where independent labour unions were declared illegal, political dissent crushed and many artists and writers imprisoned. The early 1960s were marked by a number of top-secret US attempts to topple the Cuban government.

The Bay of Pigs invasion, the CIA's failed attempt to overthrow Castro by training Cuban exiles for a ground attack, was followed by Operation Mongoose, an ongoing campaign to assassinate Castro. Between 1961 and 1963 there were at least five plots to kill, maim or humiliate the Cuban leader.

The Cuban economy stagnated during the 1960s and 70s and many Cubans escaped to the US – or died trying. Relations with the US deteriorated during that time and in 1962, the US imposed an embargo on Cuba. The darkest moment in the countries' relationship came on the morning of October 15, 1962, when US spy planes discovered evidence that the then Soviet Union (USSR) was building missile bases in Cuba.



US President Kennedy learned of the threat the following morning and for the next 12 days the US and the USSR were locked in a tense nuclear face-off, famously known as the Cuban Missile Crisis. The crisis ended only when Soviet statesman, Nikita Khrushchev, accepted Kennedy's secret proposal to remove US missiles from Turkey in exchange for the disarming of Cuba. The Soviet missiles were gone within six months, but it would be a long time before the US forgave Cuba for allowing them to be sited so close to the US mainland.

In April 1980, a downturn in the economy caused thousands of dissatisfied Cubans to seek political asylum in foreign countries. Castro announced that anyone who wanted to leave could do so through its north-western port, Mariel Harbour. Over the next six months, 125,000 Cubans clambered onto boats and made their way to the US. Castro also released criminals, and inpatients from psychiatric hospitals, with as many as 22,000 of these landing on the shores of Florida. Cuba refused to take them back.

After Raúl Castro stepped down as president in February 2018, after a 10-year rule, Miguel Díaz-Canel was officially named the new leader of Cuba in April, after a secret vote in the country's National Assembly. This is the first time in nearly 60 years that Cuba has been led by a man who is not a Castro.

People and Culture

Cuba has approximately 11.3 million inhabitants and is the most populous island nation in the Caribbean. Cuba is a multi-racial society with a population of mainly Spanish and African origins. 66 percent are of Spanish ancestry, 12 per cent of African ancestry, and 22 per cent are mulatto (mix of Spanish and African).

Cuban music is exceptionally popular and easily recognised around the globe. Cuban music is a mixture of genres, styles and has a long and interesting history that includes African, Spanish, US, Latin-American, and European styles of music.

Dance is the very heart and soul of Cuban music's appeal, and son is the dance style at the centre of it all. Son is a unique Creole style of dance originating from Cuba's east. The dance

has African and Spanish influences and is the basis of nearly all of Cuba's dance.

One of the most famous dances to originate from son is salsa. Cuban Salsa blends dance influences from mambo, danzon, guaguanco, and many other types of folkloric dancing from Afro-Cuban styles. Salsa dancing is a common expression of Cuban social culture, and Latin Americans consider salsa to be an integral part of both their cultural and social activities. Other popular dance and music styles found in Cuba include bolero, chachacha, and the rumba.

Cuban literature emerged as its own unique style in the early 19th century. Several writers gained prominence espousing intellectualism and the concept of freedom. These ideas gained perhaps their greatest intensity in the writings of José Martí, a Cuban of modest Spanish background who led the Modernist movement in Cuban literature. He inspired an entire school of writing devoted to winning freedom from Spain. Writers whose works reflected social

protest in the pre-Castro period include Nicolás Guillén, a leader in founding the Afro-Cuban school of literature, and Jose Z. Tallet - both activists and poets. In the 20th century short stories became the predominant prose form, but exceptional novels were also produced. The works of the poet, novelist, and essayist José Lezama Lima have also been influential. In addition, the works of the American writer Ernest Hemingway are deeply admired in Cuba.

Hemingway called Cuba his home for many years and the island nation were setting for both his books *The Old Man and the Sea*, and *Islands in the Stream*. Other notable modern Cuban writers such as Reinaldo Arenas, Guillermo Cabrera Infante, Leonardo Padura Fuentes, and Ronaldo Menendez earned international attention, living and writing under Fidel Castro's oppressive regime. By the early 21st century, Cuban writers had published large numbers of major novels and literary magazines.

Time Zone

Cuba is in Greenwich Meantime (GMT) zone GMT-4.



Money

Two types of currency circulate officially in Cuba: the Cuban peso (CUP), also called moneda nacional (national currency) and the 'convertible peso' (CUC). The convertible peso is a closed currency, which means it cannot be purchased outside of Cuba. Many Cubans refer to both currencies as pesos and both are often denoted by the dollar sign. Cubans usually trade in pesos, while tourists use 'convertible pesos' (CUC). It is perfectly legal to have and use US dollars in Cuba, but it is not recommended as there is an additional 10 per cent surcharge on top of the exchange rate.

Upon arrival in Cuba, travellers will need to exchange part of their currency for convertible pesos. Money can be exchanged on arrival at the airport, at the money exchange bureau called cadeca. Hotels also offer a money exchange service. A passport must be presented at all cadecas and banks when exchanging money into CUCs. It should be noted that only banknotes can be exchanged. Coinage cannot. Always bring new banknotes with no rips, tears or markings. Travellers should also check the cashier's calculation, ask for a printed receipt and check the money received carefully against the amount shown on the receipt.

There is no commission on exchanging money in Cuba because the commission is built into the exchange rate.

Any leftover money can be exchanged at the airport on departing Cuba.

Occasionally, there can be difficulties when exchanging money at banks at the airport, so it is recommended that travellers carry some cash, at least enough for the first few days. It is also recommended that travellers inform their bank that they are travelling to Cuba so as to avoid issues when using cards at ATMs and in retail outlets.

The peso is worth less than the convertible peso, so travellers should ensure that if paying in CUCs they receive change in CUCs. It is a good idea to carry CUCs in low denominations as some businesses have difficulty giving change for large amounts. Businesses may also be asked to see a passport if a

customer is choosing to pay with 50 or 100 CUC notes.

Banks are open Monday to Friday from 9.00 am to 5.00 pm. Shops are open Monday to Saturday from 9.00 am to 6.30 pm and Sunday from 9.00 am to 12.30 pm.

Please check websites such as www.oanda.com or www.xe.com for up to date exchange rates prior to your departure.

Credit Cards

VISA and/or prepaid cash passport cards are the most reliable cards to bring to Cuba as these are accepted in all BFI/ Banco Metropolitano banks, as well as in most cadecas and by ATMs. Mastercard also works - with the exception of the Australian-issued card. Credit cards linked to US-based banks or European banks with a US holding or parent company, are not accepted in Cuba. In Havana, the most reliable ATMs are located in the Panorama Hotel and the courtyard at the Miramar Trade Center.

A three per cent processing fee for a cash advance from the Cuban bank is charged in addition to any charges that may be applied by the traveller's own bank.

Traveller's cheques, including those issued by US companies such as American Express, are still accepted in Cuba but generally only in major tourist centres like Havana. Fees can be up to about three per cent of the purchase price. Receipts as proof of purchase of the traveller's cheques are required before they can be redeemed. Traveller's cheques cannot be refunded if lost or stolen in Cuba.

Long Distance Dialling, Emergency Numbers

Country code: +53

Emergency: 106

Police: 106

Fire: 105



Climate

The climate in Cuba is sub-tropical with cool trade winds providing some relief from the heat and humidity. Cuba has two seasons: a dry season (November to April), and a wet season (May to October). Rainfall during the wet season can vary from a passing shower to a downpour that lasts much longer.

June to November is hurricane season, with September and October being the most active months for hurricanes and tropical storms.

The average year-round temperature is approximately 27°C and there is plenty of sunshine. From January to March temperatures may decrease due to cold fronts, which in some cases are preceded by heavy rains. July and August are the hottest months of the year in when temperatures may reach 30°C.

Language

Spanish is the most widely spoken language in Cuba. English is usually understood in Cuba but outside of the main tourist destinations, many people may not speak English.

Religion

The largest organized religion in Cuba is Roman Catholicism, imposed by the Spanish colonisers in the 15th century. However, the Roman Catholic Church has never been as influential in Cuba as in other Latin American countries. In the 1950s, approximately 85% of all Cubans were nominally Roman Catholic, but the Church itself conceded that only about 10% were active members.

A ban on religious believers joining the Communist Party was lifted in 1992, and the constitution was amended to characterise the state as secular instead of atheist.

In 1996, Fidel Castro visited Pope John Paul II at the Vatican and the Pope visited Cuba in January 1998. Fidel has stated in the past that there is no conflict between Marxism and Christianity and has been sympathetic towards supporters of liberation theology in their quest for equality and a just distribution of social wealth. Christmas Day celebration had been suspended in the 1960s, but at the Pope's request, the Cuban government decreed the 25th of December a public holiday again.

Afro-Cuban religions, a blend of native African religions and Roman Catholicism, are widely practiced in Cuba. From the mid-16th to the late 19th century, hundreds of thousands of African slaves were brought to Cuba. They carried with them a system of animistic beliefs that they managed to mix with Catholicism.

Tipping

Tipping is common in Cuba. Restaurant and bar staff, maids, porters and tour guides are all accustomed to being tipped. Tipping practices vary from one individual to another and from one culture to another. Several restaurants and bars include a 10 per cent service fee in the bill as a tip. This is usually specified in the menu.



Cuisine

Cuba's fascinating history has greatly influenced its food and cooking styles. During the colonial era, Havana was an important trading port and the first stop for newly-arrived Spanish immigrants. Many of the immigrants were from southern Spain and brought cattle and pigs with them; hence many Cuban dishes have their roots in Andalusian cuisine.

A noteworthy Chinese influence on Cuban cuisine occurred in the Havana area in the mid-1800s, when large groups of Chinese indentured labourers arrived to do the work formerly done by African slaves after slavery was abolished. The Chinese introduced rice, which became a staple not just in Cuba, but all of Central America.

La caja china, 'the Chinese Box' was directly influenced by Chinese cooking techniques. Cubans had watched the Chinese labourers in Havana's Chinatown cooking their meals on makeshift wooden boxes. Adopted by Cubans, this efficient cooking method improved the traditional lechón asado (slow-roasted pork), making it soft and tender. To this day, the Chinese Box is still seen at major Cuban festivities.

Made of plywood and lined with aluminum, the Chinese Box is large enough to take a whole pig. An aluminium lid is placed over the timber box to seal it, and the lid is then covered with charcoal to slowly roast the pig. Roast pork is part of every Cuban celebration including New Year's Eve and Christmas Eve. There are lots of ways to cook a whole pig, but at major festivities the preferred and traditional method for roasting a pig is in a Chinese Box.

In the 1950s, Cuba was an exotic playground for the glitterati with fine food in abundance. Celebrities would flock to Havana to dine and party in the trendy upmarket restaurants and bars.

Cuban cuisine is a fusion of Native American Taino food, Spanish, African and Caribbean cuisines. A typical meal consist of rice and beans, cooked either together or separately. Some recognisable dishes are moros y cristianos (mixed black beans and rice) and pollo en salsa (chicken in sauce). When cooked together the recipe is called either 'Congri' or 'Moros', or 'Moros y Cristianos'.

Main meals (pork, chicken or shredded beef) are accompanied by either yucca, or malanga potato, and plantains – all served boiled or fried. A simple salad of tomato, lettuce, avocado and occasionally, cucumber, carrots, cabbage and radish, also often accompanies a meal. The most popular sauce used to accompany not only roasted pork but also the boiled tubers, is mojo or mojito (not to be confused with the mojito cocktail), made with oil, garlic, onion, citrus juice or vinegar and spices.

Tamales are also popular in Cuba. Made from grounded corn and stuffed with stir-fried tomato, onion, garlic, and pieces of pork meat, the tamales are wrapped in corn leaves and boiled in salted water.

Cuban desserts typically consist of tropical fruit candied in syrup with anise and cinnamon, and served with white cheese.

Hotels and restaurants also provide international cuisine and there a few restaurants specialising in Italian, Chinese and Spanish cuisines, and seafood.

Cuban rum is well-known around the world and the most famous of the brand is Havana Club, which is enjoyed across the country. It is quite common to see Cuban locals on the street, chatting, laughing and even dancing with the famous Havana Club in hand.

National Holidays

Liberation Day, Victory of Armed Forces Day, Good Friday, Labour Day, National Revolution Holiday, Independence Day, Christmas Day, New Year's Eve

Electricity

Electricity in Cuba is 110 volts. Most modern hotels have dual voltage with 220-volt sockets available in guest rooms.



Honduras - General Information

Population: approximately 9.4 million

Capital: Tegucigalpa

Honduras, officially known as Republic of Honduras, is a country in Central America located between Guatemala and El Salvador to the west, and Nicaragua to the south and east. The Caribbean Sea washes its northern coast, the Pacific Ocean its narrow coast to the south, and Honduras includes the offshore Caribbean department of the Bay Islands. The administrative capital is Tegucigalpa. San Pedro Sula is an important industrial and commercial centre.

History

The history of Honduras begins when people migrating from North America to South America used Central America as a land bridge - many who made the crossing ended up staying. Artifacts found throughout the region show that humans were in Honduras between 12,000 BC and 8,000 BC. For the next few thousand years, Honduras was home to various tribes of different ethnicities dotted around the country. By 150 AD, the Mayan civilisation had taken hold in the areas to the north and west of Honduras – Guatemala, Mexico, and Belize.

It was during the Pre-classic period between 2000 BC and 200 AD that the Maya first arrived in the western Honduras and founded the city of Copán, near the Guatemalan border. Most of Honduras did not come not under Mayan control and neighbouring nations and tribes traded with, and fought the Maya.

Between 400 AD and 800 AD, Copán was at its peak as the unrivalled capital of a Maya kingdom. From 800 AD onwards, the city collapsed. The ruling elites left Copán and the city turned to ruin as people stole the stones for their own construction.

The centuries after Copán's collapse leading up to the arrival of the Spanish were uneventful. However, things changed forever on 30 July, 1502, when Christopher Columbus, on his fourth and final voyage to the New World landed on the

island of Guanaja, one of Honduras's Bay Islands. He was the first European to reach Central America.

Honduras became the scene of battles between rival Spanish conquistadors, and efforts by the indigenous people to gain control of the land. In 1539, Honduras was a part of the Spanish Empire under control of the Captaincy-General of Guatemala. Spanish rule was always centred around the mining areas. As silver mining became more important, the Spanish moved inland and left the coast unguarded.

Unlike most other parts of Central America, where the Spanish found no treasure, Honduras had silver. Indigenous people from all over Central America came (not of their own volition) to work in the mines, and later on, slaves were brought from Africa. Honduras became quite wealthy in comparison to the rest of Central America. The capital, Tegucigalpa, was founded in 1578 in the mining area.

The coastal part of Honduras, including the Bay Islands, became less influenced by the Spanish. As the Spanish moved abandoned the coastal areas, the pirates, who had more or less taken control of the Bay Islands, moved in. The British also stepped in, backing the Miskito tribe against the Spanish. Once the Miskito tribe had formed an alliance with the British, it enabled the British to take over the entire Caribbean coast of Central America. This was the area known as the Mosquito Coast.

In 1821, Mexico gained independence from Spain and with it, the Captaincy-General of Guatemala, of which Honduras was a part. Two years after that, the Captaincy-General broke free from Mexico and Central America became an independent federal republic. After a few tumultuous years, The Federal Republic of Central America dissolved in 1839, with each of its provinces becoming independent. Honduras became a sovereign nation.



Economy

Honduras is one of the poorest countries in Latin America. Economic growth is approximately five per cent annually. However, average wages have only increased slightly over time and many people live below the poverty line. It is estimated that there are more than 1.2 million people unemployed.

The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund classified Honduras as one of the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries eligible for debt relief. Both the electricity and landline telephone services are run by government monopolies.

People and Culture

The population of Honduras is predominantly of Mestizo descent and Roman Catholic faith. The Caribbean coast of Honduras and the outlying Bay Islands are home to the Garifuna people, descendants of African slaves and Arawak Indians from the West Indies. They were deported to the island of Roatán by the British in the 18th century. From Roatán, the Garifuna people spread to the mainland, including Belize and Guatemala.

Honduras also has the largest Palestinian community in Central America. Their ancestors came from the Ottoman Empire during the late 19th and early 20th century. This community lives around the city of San Pedro Sula, Honduras's commercial hub. There is also a small Chinese population in Honduras. Indigenous tribes include the Chortís (of Mayan descent), Payas or Pech; Tolupanes or Xicaques, Lencas, Sumos or Tawahkas; and Olmecas. For the most part, these tribes live in extreme poverty due to their remote location and a lack of government interest in their situation.

Nature and Wildlife

Honduran terrain is mostly mountainous with a large, undeveloped lowland jungle (La Mosquitia or Mosquito) region in the north-east and the heavily populated lowland San Pedro Sula valley in the north-west. In La Mosquitia lies the UNESCO-protected Biosphere of Río Plátano, with the Río Negro dividing the country from Nicaragua. Natural resources include timber, gold, silver, copper, lead, zinc, iron ore, antimony, coal and fish.

The Mesoamerican region – the landmass that extends from Southern Mexico to Panama – and known for its diversity of species, is often referred to as a 'biodiversity hotspot'. Honduras has a great diversity of flora, with more than 64 plant varieties. Among its fauna is the Guacamaya or Guara Roja, a brilliantly-coloured macaw that is the national bird emblem of the country. Honduras has about 91 protected reserves accounting for 27 per cent of the country's area.

Approximately 6,000–8,000 species of vascular plants can be found in Honduran forests. Approximately 245 recorded species of reptiles and amphibians and about 110 mammal species also live in Honduras. There is a rich variety of birdlife with 754 bird species documented to date, and at least 50 other species sighted.

Bay Islands

The Bay Islands are a group of three large islands and more than 60 small keys and reefs located about 55 kilometres off the Honduran coast. Utila is the smallest, flattest and closest of the three islands to the main land and Roatán the largest. Roatán is the most developed island and boasts the highest visitor numbers. The Bay Islands have the greatest variety of corals and swamps in the Caribbean and are famous for their excellent dive spots.



Time Zone

Honduras is in Greenwich Meantime (GMT) zone GMT-6.

Money

The official currency in Honduras is the lempira (HNL). Its name commemorates the Cacique Lempira, an indigenous leader of the Lenca ethnic group who defended his territory during the Spanish conquest.

All major credit cards are accepted in the larger tourist areas and at most restaurants, hotels and stores. In smaller stores, credit cards are less likely to be accepted and usually a card processing fee of up to six per cent is charged. We therefore recommend that travellers take US dollars in cash. Traveller's cheques are not commonly accepted. ATMs usually require a Visa or Cirrus network card.

Please check websites such as www.oanda.com or www.xe.com for up to date exchange rates prior to your departure.

Long Distance Dialling, Emergency Numbers

Country code: +504

Ambulance: 128

Police: 118

Fire: 115 (911 from mobile phones)

Climate

Honduras borders the Caribbean Sea on the north coast and the Pacific Ocean on the south, through the Gulf of Fonseca. The climate varies from tropical in the lowlands to temperate in the mountains. The central and southern regions are relatively hotter and less humid than the northern coast. Honduras enjoys warm tropical temperatures throughout the year, with an average of around 25°C / 77°F.

There are two distinct seasons: a dry season, that begins in November and ends between April and May, and a wet season that occurs during the months of May, June, July, September and October. However, the climate varies due to Honduras's location between the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea. The north is hot and humid; the central region is cooler and the south is usually hot and dry. The central highlands are a lot cooler than the hot lowlands on the Caribbean and Pacific coasts.

Cuisine

Honduras is not known for its cuisine. It does not have the creative culinary background and diverse regional dishes found in countries such as Mexico or Peru. Despite this, travellers who venture from the typical tourist trails may find themselves rewarded with some gastronomic gems.

Plato típico: the national dish of Honduras is an enormous mountain of food, called consisting of beef, plantain, beans, marinated cabbage, fresh cream and tortillas.

Anafres: a refried black bean and cheese fondue served in a clay pot and accompanied by tortilla chips, is Honduras's favourite appetiser.

Baleada : similar to the Mexican taco, is a folded wheat flour tortilla filled with beans, crumbled cheese, sour cream and occasionally beef, chicken or pork, is a snack found all over Honduras, including restaurants, fast food outlets and street stalls. In the highlands, chuletas de cerdo (pork chops) are on most restaurant menus as is steak and other beef dishes. Fish caught in freshwater lakes on the mainland, especially Lago de Yojoa, are fried whole and served with plantains. The term, 'estilo de Yojoa', can be seen all over the country and generally signifies a fish fried whole. Fried chicken is another very common meal found across the country.

Garífuna Cooking

On the north coast and in the Bay Islands, Garífuna restaurants, which are often just beachside champas, (thatched roofed wooden shacks on stilts), are well-known for their tapado, a seafood stew made with sweet potatoes, malanga, yucca and plantains. Pescado al ajillo, grilled fish in garlic sauce, along with ceviche, conch and stews, are made with coconut milk and served with cassava bread. Shrimp prepared in a dozen ways is also enjoyed along the coast. Pan de coco, or coconut bread, is served with every Garífuna meal.

Lenca Cooking

While the Lencas are the largest indigenous group in Honduras, their unique recipes are almost entirely contained along the Lenca Trail near Gracias. Tamales, steamed corn dough stuffed with different ingredients, are big here. Ticucos, a tamale with legumes, beans and the herb, loroco, are common, while a tamale called chorocos can be found only in San Manuel de Colohete. Different types of chorizos, pollo en crema de locro (chicken in loroco cream) and lengua de res (beef tongue), are standard fare.



Coffee is consumed in large quantities throughout the country. Coffee is one of the major cash crops of Honduras and production is concentrated in Olancho, in the Copán Valley and also along the north coast. Larger operations, such as Café Copán, export to the world, while smaller gourmet and organic brands, such as Café Welchez, cater mostly to tourists. Nearly all coffee served in Honduras is freshly brewed and is almost always served black with plenty of sugar.

A popular refreshment is licuado – a blended milk and fruit shake. Horchata is a sweet milk-and-rice drink, similar to a hot rice pudding, and is served in the western part of the country.

Beer is probably the drink of choice at bars and restaurants across the country. International brands are available almost everywhere but most people prefer the local brands, all brewed by the same company – Cervecería Nacional. The two most common beers are the light, smooth Port Royal, a pilsner in a green bottle; and Salva Vida, a lager served in a brown bottle.

Imperial, also a lager, is the heaviest of the three and is the beer of choice in the south and in Olancho. The independent D&D Brewery at Lago de Yojoa, is the first microbrewery in the country. Although it brews several types of beer, they are only available on tap at the brewery and in one restaurant in Copán.

Guifiti, a traditional drink that combines alcohol with medicinal plants, is consumed in Garífuna communities during festivals or to cure ailments. The country's favourite spirit is the rotgut aguardiente, sometimes called guaro. The town of Yuscarán, south of Tegucigalpa, is the main production centre and home to the El Buen Gusto factory where the spirit is distilled.

In the Bay Islands and all along the Caribbean coast, rum is the preferred spirit. There are no Honduran rum producers but the brand of rum, Flor de Caña, from neighbouring Nicaragua, can be found everywhere and it also has a distillery in Honduras.

Tap water throughout Honduras is generally not safe to drink. Travellers should also avoid unpeeled fruit, uncooked vegetables, fish and seafood.

Language

The official language of Honduras is Spanish but along the northern coast (Bay Islands) are communities of English speakers who have maintained their culture since the time Honduras was part of the British Empire.

Religion

The predominant religion is Roman Catholicism. Protestants are the largest of the remaining religious denominational groups outside Catholicism, with notable congregations in the east and on the Bay Islands. There has been rapid growth in Protestant churches, especially since the devastation caused by Hurricane Mitch in 1998.

National Holidays

New Year's Day, Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter Saturday, Americas' Day, Independence Day, Francisco Moranzan's Birthday, Columbus Day, Army Day, Christmas Day.

Electricity

Honduras power outlets deliver 110 volts.



Mexico - General Information

Population: approximately 131 million

Capital: Mexico City

The Mexican culture is perhaps one of the most fascinating cultures worldwide. The mixture of strong native legends, artistic expressions and Spanish culture elements make the Mexican culture unique.

History

Before Spain invaded Mexico, the civilisations of ancient Mexico achieved important advances in military strategy, architecture, mathematics and agriculture. The Olmec culture was the most dominant of the Mesoamerican civilisations. The Olmecs lived between 1,200 BC and 800 BC and among their achievements is a complex system of numbers without which the Mayan calendar could not have been created. After the Olmecs, several other great civilisations rose to prominence, the most famous being the Maya, who were master architects and the Aztecs, who faced the Spanish conquerors in 1519.

When Hernán Cortés and his men arrived in Mexico, the Aztecs thought the Spanish were sent by a god to help them in their battles with other tribes. Cortés soon showed his true intentions and war ensued. In 1521, Cortés defeated the Aztecs and claimed the land for the Spanish crown.

Although the Aztecs were superior in strategy and military organisation, the Spanish had more advanced weapons. The Spanish continued their conquest of Mexico and by Spanish royal decree, the explorers were able to keep all but 20 per cent of the value of the treasures they found. As a result of continuous Spanish conquests, most of the indigenous inhabitants were forced into slavery.

Independence

After hundreds of years of Spanish colonisation, the people of Mexico aspired to independence. As a result of colonisation, Mexican society comprised a mixture of ethnicities: indigenous descendants, Mestizos (people with indigenous and Spanish ancestry), Spanish immigrants who came to Mexico to accumulate wealth, and Criollos (people of pure Spanish descent who were born in Mexico). Frustrated by the taxes imposed by the Spanish crown, the Criollos initiated an insurrection that resulted in the proclamation of Mexican Independence in 1821.

After independence, the challenge of stabilising Mexico began. In 1845, the US government annexed the Republic of Texas, an area still considered by Mexicans to be a Mexican province. When a diplomatic solution failed and US troops sent to the disputed territory were attacked, war ensued. The Mexicans were defeated but eventually appeased by compensation for the damage caused by the war and release from a considerable debt it had to US.



People and Culture

Criollos and Mestizos make up the largest part of the modern population of Mexico, while indigenous inhabitants continue to remain a minority. Thanks to the protectionist administration of several Mexican presidents, there are many federal programs designed to preserve indigenous traditions. With a rich cultural heritage, the wealth of its natural resources and the massive numbers of tourists visiting Mexico annually, Mexico's economy seems to be at its highest point in the history of the country.

The unique and distinct art of Mexico is a strong representation of Mexican culture and showcases a rich and colourful heritage. Mayan traditions are still present in modern Mexican society and this is beautifully represented in paintings. As the greatest exponent of Mexican art, painting has achieved well-deserved popularity outside of Mexico.

Some of the world's most influential artists are of Mexican heritage. Frida Kahlo is recognised as one of Mexico's most vibrant painters. Diego Rivera, who was married to Kahlo, is one of the country's most prominent muralists, who in 1934, painted famous and controversial murals in the Rockefeller Center in New York City.

Folk art traditions are also well-rooted in Mexican culture, displaying a wide array of handcrafted ornaments including clay pottery, textiles and weaving. Handmade masks are created for national festivals but these valuable items also decorate Mexican homes. Elements of Mexican mythology are still used in designs, most commonly figures of Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoc.

Mexican literature is filled with renowned names like Agustín Yáñez, Octavio Paz, Carlos Fuentes and many others and can be traced to the works of the early Mesoamerican tribes. Although much of this literature was lost due to poor preservation of texts, a significant part was preserved through many generations by an oral tradition of storytelling.

A prominent figure in the pre-colonial era was Nezahualcoyotl, who left behind a legacy of poetry and other written works in the classical Nahuatl language. Modern times brought recognition of the works of Octavio Paz. A recipient of various prizes, notably the Nobel Prize for Literature in

1990, Paz is considered one of the greatest poets of the 20th century.

Many Aztec legends are quite famous and perhaps one of the most famous is that of Quetzalcoatl, the most important figure in the Aztec cosmogony. It is said that Quetzalcoatl, while searching for the bones he needed to create mankind, reached Mictlan ('the region of the dead') where the evil god Mictlantecuhtli tried to stop him. Aided by his sacred bees and worms, Quetzalcoatl was finally able to get the precious bones and he used them to create humans.

Religion

Mexico's main religion is Roman Catholicism, which is embraced by 89 per cent of the population. The patron saint of Mexico is Our Lady of Guadalupe. The Guadalupan name and image are national symbols and widely honoured, and according to legend, the name was chosen by the Virgin herself. Guadalupe is also considered to be the link that unites Mexicans religiously and ethnically. Mexico is also home to the most-visited Catholic pilgrimage site in the world – the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City.

Time Zone

Mexico is in Greenwich Meantime (GMT) zone GMT-5.

Money

The local currency is the Mexican peso (MXP). Most travellers bring a small amount of local currency with them and withdraw from ATMs as needed. ATMs are readily available in the larger towns and cities. Credit cards are accepted in most major cities and large shopping areas. In more remote areas, using credit cards can be difficult and travellers should always carry local currency to avoid any problems.

Please check websites such as www.oanda.com or www.xe.com for up to date exchange rates prior to your departure.

Long Distance Dialling, Emergency Numbers

Country code: +52

Police, Ambulance, Fire – 066



Climate

Many travellers assume that the weather in Mexico is always warm but in reality, the climate in Mexico is as varied as its topography and largely determined by altitude and region.

Rainfall varies greatly from region to region. Only the Sierra Madre Oriental, the Isthmus of Tehuantepec and the state of Chiapas in the far south receive any appreciable amount of rain during the year, with the wet season running between June and September. Most other areas have mild wet seasons, while the northern and central areas of the central plateau are arid. There is some snow in the north in winter.

In terms of temperature, coastal areas and lowlands are hot and humid, while the central areas are temperate – even in winter. The climate of the inland highlands is mostly mild but significant differences in temperature can occur between day and night.

Despite regional differences in weather, the best time to visit Mexico is generally from mid-September to mid-May, although some regions still have a fair amount of rain in October and November. Summer brings the most rain but usually not often enough to spoil a holiday. The Gulf of Mexico region is susceptible to hurricanes from late July through to early November. April and May are the hottest months; June to September tend to be the wettest.

Cuisine

Mexico is renowned throughout the world for its distinct cuisine and there is so much more to discover gastronomically than burritos, guacamole and salsa. That is only the first course! The abundance of regional dishes including fresh meats, seafood, vegetables, fruit, cheeses, wines and liquors, makes it an epicurean paradise. Mexican home-style cooking is important and unique and the food is difficult to capture in a few sentences but one thing is guaranteed – it is always colourful and bursting with flavour! Exotic spices, salsas and sauces, such as mole, add spice and depth to a variety of Mexican dishes.

The majority of Mexican cuisine is based on Mayan and Aztec traditions along with influences from the Spanish conquistadors. Popular dishes today include tacos, burritos, tamales, quesadillas and chocolate. Due to Mexico's varying climate and diverse ethnicity, each region has created its own special cuisine. For example, in the coastal states (Yucatan, Campeche and Veracruz), the emphasis is on fresh seafood (shrimp, crab, squid, octopus, redfish and snapper).

Regional Mexican Food

The Mexican food style is very earthy, humble and rich in flavour. It incorporates a wide range of ingredients from different regions, many of which, are famous for their produce:

- The Northern region is well-known for its meat and cheeses
- The North Pacific coast grows fruit and vegetables
- Food from the Bajio region contains more rice, pork, and sausages than in other parts of Mexico
- The South-Pacific coast produces a large variety of chilli pepper, chicken and cheese
- The Southern region is known for its corn and spices
- The Gulf region produces corn and vanilla

Famous Mexican Dishes

Pico de gallo: a savoury mixture of chopped tomato, onion, cilantro, peppers and other ingredients of personal preference and is a favourite party food served with flour tortilla or pan dulce, another Mexican bread.

Enchiladas: wrapped tortilla rolls filled with either beef or chicken; seafood, potato, beans, or other combinations and topped with a chilli pepper sauce. Snacks like carnitas are made of simmered or braised pork and can also be served with any of the above mentioned.

Tacos: the range of tacos is huge – fish, carne asada (barbecued meat), fajita, beef and bean, chicken mole, chipotle pork, chorizo and potato, to name a few.

Guacamole: a simple dish made from mashed avocados, fresh lime juice, and red onions. Rice and cheeses are always on the table. They can come in the form of side dishes or be the main ingredients of small cakes such as a Zacatecan-style baked mesa cake.

Hearty soups and stews are often a meal in themselves, the most popular being carne abobada (pork and red chilli stew), rebocado (pork neck and purslane stew), and a fava bean soup made with potatoes, fava beans, corn and tomato.

Mexican dessert is uniquely creative. Although churros are a favourite in the US, their origin is strictly Mexican and not Spanish. Rice pudding ice pops (aletas de arroz con leche) are quite popular, as are ice pops - pineapple, tamarind and chilli, and strawberry and cream ice pops.



Holiday Foods

If you are travelling to Mexico at certain times of the year, you will also have the opportunity to try some holiday treats. Dia de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) is celebrated on 1 November and with it comes Pan de Muertos (Day of the Dead Bread), a round, sweet bread that is topped with sugar or sesame seeds. Tamales are a seasonal favourite, as well as mole negro (black mole sauce). A yellow squash or a pumpkin cooked with brown sugar and cinnamon is also a seasonal dish called calabaza en dulce. Calaveras de azucar or sugar skulls, are biscuits topped with sugar and/or chocolate for a sweet delight.

The Christmas season brings circular-shaped butter cookies called galletas con chochitos, decorated with green and red sprinkles to resemble little Christmas wreathes.

Cinco de Mayo (Fifth of May), is a holiday that celebrates the date of the Mexican army's 1862 victory over France at the Battle of Puebla during the Franco-Mexican War. Although a relatively minor holiday in Mexico, in the US, Cinco de Mayo has evolved into a commemoration of Mexican culture and heritage, particularly in areas with large Mexican-American populations. Colourful dishes prepared during Cinco de Mayo include churros with coconut sauce, Mexican lasagna, pinto bean salsa salad and chicken mole enchiladas.

Tipping

In Mexico, it is customary to leave a tip as a thank you to waiters, valets, service station attendants, and any service provider. In restaurants, bars and cafes, it is usual to tip at least 10 per cent of the bill and if the service was outstanding, you can leave more. Some restaurants or bars include the tip in the bill, so it is important to check the bill before paying to avoid overpayment.

Health

The tap water is generally not safe to drink in Mexico. Bottled water is readily available to purchase at local shops, hotels and restaurants. Ice is not always made with boiled or bottled water, so order your beverages "sin hielo" (without ice) or ask your tour leader or guide if the ice is safe in a particular restaurant. It is also important to remember to use bottled water for brushing teeth as well!

Language

Spanish is the most widely spoken language in Mexico. Of the 62 Amerindian languages recognised, Nahuatl is the most important, spoken by nearly a quarter of the population. Maya is spoken by 14 per cent of Native Mexicans, followed by Mixteco and Zapoteco, which are spoken by seven per cent. English is usually understood in Mexico but outside of the main tourist destinations, many people may not speak English.

National Holidays

New Year's Day, Constitution Day, Benito Juarez Day, Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Labor Day, Anniversary of the Battle of Puebla (Cinco de Mayo or Fifth of May), Presidential Election Day, Independence Day, Columbus Day, All Souls' Day, Revolution Day, Presidential Inauguration Day, Lady of Guadalupe Day, Christmas Day.

Electricity

Electricity in Mexico is 110 volts.



Nicaragua - General Information

Population: approximately 6.3 million

Capital: Managua

In the heart of Central America, Nicaragua truly deserves the descriptive nickname of 'the land of lakes and volcanoes'. Visitors to Nicaragua are able to enjoy the natural beauty of dozens of volcanoes, rivers and lakes, as well as two oceans.

Covering an area of 130,668 square kilometres / 81,193 square miles, Nicaragua is the largest country in Central America. The extensive Atlantic coastal plain rises to the central interior mountains, which in turn give way to a narrow Pacific coastal plain interrupted by volcanoes. Highest elevation: Mogotón 2,107 metres / 6,912 feet. Nicaragua claims the largest expanse of tropical rainforest north of the Amazon, covering much of the northern and eastern regions.

The mountains and the western part of the country are somewhat more arid. There are many lakes and rivers accounting for some 9,240 square kilometres / 5,740 square miles of the country's total surface area. Lake Nicaragua, Central America's largest lake, covers more than 8,000 square kilometres / 4,970 square miles, while Lake Managua stretches more than 1,000 square kilometre / 621 square miles.

Nicaragua is divided into several regions based on its varying climatic zones. The country has three regions, which vary greatly in weather, geography and population. These three areas are the Pacific Region, Central Region, and the Caribbean Region consisting of two sub-regions: North Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region (RACCN), and the South Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region (RACCS). Located at the very centre of the Americas, Nicaragua is an ideal place to visit for anyone looking for something uniquely different and adventurous.

Nicaragua offers an immense variety of activities such as visiting the Spanish colonial cities of Granada and Leon, surfing world-class waves, hiking volcanoes and zip-lining through the forest canopy.

Ever popular is kayaking on the calm waters of Lake Cocibolca, also known as Lake Nicaragua, an immense lake with over three hundred islands and boasts the only freshwater sharks in the world. Nicaragua has a rich diversity of animal and plant species and is especially great for those interested in ecotourism.

The Caribbean region is also a popular spot for tourists and is home to Bluefields and the Corn Islands. Bluefields is a laid-back town where tourism is still in its infancy, allowing visitors to experience authentic local culture. The Corn Islands, comprising Little Corn and Big Corn island, have long been well-known to surfers and backpackers and were once a refuge for pirates.

The two islands, located 69 kilometres / 43 miles off the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua, are a tropical paradise offering travellers the opportunity to enjoy crystal-clear turquoise waters, white sand beaches, palm trees, stunning reefs and marine life and are perfect for snorkelling, scuba diving and kayaking.

San Juan region includes the area where the San Juan River flows from Lake Nicaragua to the Caribbean Sea. This area is packed full of natural beauty and various protected reserves. This region is completely made up of tropical rainforest and is home to very rich biodiversity.



History

Nicaragua, which means, 'here united with the water,' is a sovereign state of people who love freedom and independence.

The western region of the country was colonised by Spain, while the east was once a British-held region with a culture similar to that of the Caribbean nations. Today, the country is a democracy holding regular elections and with a government dedicated to social justice and peace.

Nicaragua takes its name from Nicarao, the chief of an indigenous tribe that once lived around present-day Lake Nicaragua. In 1524, Hernandez de Cordoba founded the first Spanish permanent settlements in the region, including two of Nicaragua's two principal towns – Granada, located on Lake Nicaragua, and Leon, east of Lake Managua. Nicaragua gained independence from Spain in 1821, briefly becoming a part of the Mexican Empire before joining the Federal Republic of Central America. In 1838, Nicaragua became an independent republic.

Much of Nicaragua's politics since independence has been characterised by the rivalry between the liberal elite of Leon and the conservative elite of Granada, which often spilled into civil war. Initially invited by the Liberals in 1855 to join their struggle against the Conservatives, William Walker, an American, and his 'filibusters' seized the presidency in 1856. The Liberals and Conservatives united to drive him out of office in 1857, after which three decades of Conservative rule ensued.

Taking advantage of divisions within the Conservative ranks, Jose Santos Zelaya led a Liberal revolt that brought him to power in 1893. In 1894, Zelaya ended the longstanding dispute with Britain over the Atlantic coast and reincorporated the region into Nicaragua. However, due to differences over an isthmian canal and concessions to Americans in Nicaragua as well as a concern for what was perceived as Nicaragua's destabilising influence in the region, in 1909 the US provided political support to Conservative-led forces rebelling against

President Zelaya and intervened militarily to protect US lives and property.

Zelaya resigned later that year. The US maintained a military presence in Nicaragua from 1912 until 1933, with the exception of a 9-month period in 1925–26. Between 1927 and 1933, US Marines stationed in Nicaragua engaged in an ongoing battle with rebel forces led by renegade Liberal, General Augusto Sandino.

Since pre-colonial times Nicaragua's fertile Pacific coast has attracted settlers, thus concentrating most of the population in the western part of the country. Due to its proximity to the West Indies, the Caribbean coast has historically been the site of foreign intervention and immigration from non-Hispanic black and indigenous groups from the Caribbean, as well as British settlers and pirates. The diverse ethnic groups that now inhabit the Caribbean coast have for centuries resisted Hispanic Nicaraguan governments and demanded political autonomy.

For a majority of the 20th century, Nicaragua has been oppressed by dictatorial regimes. From the mid-1930s until 1979 the Somoza family controlled the government, the military and an expanding sector of the Nicaraguan economy. On 19 July 1979, Somoza's rule came to an end after an insurrection movement led by the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) triumphed. However, the predominance of the FSLN led to the development of a different kind of authoritarian regime that lasted for more than a decade.

During the 1980s Nicaragua was the centre of Cold War confrontation in the Western Hemisphere with the former USSR and Cuba aiding the Sandinista government, while the US supported anti-government forces. A regional peace initiative brought an end to civil war in the late 1980s. The Sandinistas lost in the 1990 elections and a new government headed by President Violeta Barrios de Chamorro was installed.



People and Culture

Nicaragua's population of 6.3 million is concentrated mostly in the western regions of the country. The largest ethnic population is mestizo – a mix of European and indigenous, with smaller groups of Europeans, Jamaicans, and other indigenous minorities. The culture of Nicaragua reflects the mixed Ibero-European and Indian ancestry of the majority of its people.

Religion plays a big role within the Nicaraguan culture. Religious freedom and tolerance are promoted both by the government and in the constitution. Religious authorities lend their guidance in key state developments and they often mediate between parties during political crises. Many religious celebrations take place throughout the country. These events are often loud, joyous celebrations that attract large crowds with dance, and music.

Each city or town has its own official patron saint, known as the 'Santo Patrono'. These have been designated since colonial times. As well as honouring these saints with gifts in exchange for blessings, people celebrate through Fiestas Patronales, which are colourful, folkloric events that can last several days. The highlight of these festivals tends to be the philharmonic bands or chicheros, where trumpets, clarinets, drums and a cymbal come together to create an energetic melody.

Climate

The Nicaraguan climate is tropical in the lowlands and cooler in the highlands. Temperatures vary from 27–32°C during the rainy season from May to October and from 30–35°C during the dry season from November to April. The climate in the western region of the country between the lakes and the Pacific Ocean is dry and has little rainfall. The eastern part is hot, humid and wet. Nicaraguans refer to the dry season as summer and the wet season as winter.

During the dry season (January – June) there is virtually no rain and trees and plants start to dry out. The rains arrive around June and July and by August and September, it often rains each day. Fortunately, it just rains for a short period of time and these are often spectacular, tropical downpours.

Generally speaking, the dry season is the most popular visiting time in Nicaragua – not only because there is less rain – but also because temperatures are cooler, which makes for a great time on the beach.

Importance of Corn to Nicaraguan Cuisine

Corn is perhaps of the greatest importance to Central American cuisine. A large part of Nicaraguan culinary culture incorporates corn into its recipes as a sole or mixed ingredient. A vast variety of foods, drinks and desserts are made of maize and form part of the Nicaraguan's daily diet.

The birthplace of this millennium plant is located between Mexico and Central America. Legend attributes the discovery of maize to Quetzalcoatl, a mythical-historical figure, hero of a civilisation and guide of the Mesoamerican peoples, said to have placed a grain of corn on the lips of the first man and woman, so that, while eating it they may 'work and think'.

Once the cultivation of the grain became popular on the continent, maize became a unifying element for people and a factor in social transformation. The development and increase of its production allowed for rapid advancement of social-economic organisation.

Corn was also endowed with magical and religious properties. Witch doctors and priests used it in rites and ceremonies. The Tonalpohuali Calendar, (or the magic succession of 18 months of 20 days each), dedicated the eighth month to the sacred rite of Xilonem, Goddess of the New Corn.

Corn is planted and harvested in the same manner as done in the past. Sowing begins when the farmer hears the first thunder announcing the proximity of the winter rains. A few weeks later, the corn festivities may begin.

In Masaya, they go all out with corn pastries, foods, and drinks called rosquillas, chicha de maiz, corn with ginger, nacatamales, arroz aguado, pig's head, pork with casaba and oxtail soup.

Chilotes – corn cobs, which because of their position and size on the corn spike, do not mature can be eaten barbecued or boiled, in a sauce, with vinegar and even raw.

Nacatamales and other types of tamales made from corn dough, include tamal de masa and tamal pisque. These may be kept for up to a few days without refrigeration and are popular for taking on long trips. Tamales can be stuffed with many ingredients but the best of all, is the nacatamales. There are different types of nacatamales: The cacique Indio (The Indian Chief), which is large and contains lots of chilli and spices. The Ladino, (The Crossbreed); mixed with potatoes, rice and a few olives. The nacatamales for parties (High-Life): is made with prunes, raisins and capers in thinned dough.



Time Zone

Nicaragua is in Greenwich Meantime (GMT) zone GMT-6.

Money

The currency of Nicaragua is the córdoba (NIO). Most establishments will accept payment in US dollars. Major credit cards are typically accepted in hotels, restaurants and stores in both urban and tourist areas. Currency exchange can be transacted at most banks and hotels. The córdoba is sometimes also referred to as the peso.

Banks hours are generally Monday to Friday from 8:30 am to 4:30 pm, and Saturday from 8:30 am to 12:30 am.

Please check websites such as www.oanda.com or www.xe.com for up to date exchange rates prior to your departure.

Long Distance Dialling, Emergency Numbers

Country code: +505

Ambulance: 128

Police: 118

Fire: 115 (911 from mobile phones)

Language

Spanish is the official language and is spoken by the vast majority of Nicaraguans. English and indigenous languages

are used along the Caribbean coast and in parts of the Atlantic coastal plain. Many Nicaraguans also speak some English.

Taxes and Tips

A service charge of approximately 10 percent is generally added to all bills. Be sure to check the bill to see if it has been included. In some cases, good service may deserve an additional discretionary gratuity.

Electricity

Electricity in Nicaragua is 120 volts.

Health, Safety and Security

Nicaragua is a developing country and travellers should avoid carrying any valuables in public that may jeopardise their safety.

Tap water in Managua has been tested and declared safe to drink. Nicaragua's water supply is treated and chlorinated but beyond the capital, travellers are advised to drink bottled water and avoid having ice in their drinks.

National Holidays

New Year's Day, Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Labour Day, Liberation Day, Battle of San Jacinto, Independence Day, Immaculate Conception, Christmas Day



Panama - General Information

Population: approximately 4.1 million

Capital: Panama City

History

Panama had a long and rich history for more than 12,000 years prior to Spanish colonisation. Early cultures in Panama were the Monagrillo, the Cueva and the Conte, particularly famous for their pottery, which was the first in the Americas.

In 1513, Vasco Nuñez de Balboa was the first Spaniard to see the Pacific Ocean from the top of a hill. Four days later he and his men stood at the shores of the new ocean. Balboa was also able to confirm the stories of the existence of indigenous people.

Panama City was founded in 1519 and became an important trade hub en route from Peru to Spain. Peruvian gold and silver were shipped across the Pacific to Panama City, transported overland across the Isthmus before being shipped again to Spain. The path through Panama became famous as Camino Real or Royal Trail. Because many died on this road and crosses were erected in their memory, the path is also known as Camino de las Cruces.

In 1671, the notorious English buccaneer Henry Morgan looted and completely destroyed Panama City. In the same decade, a new Panama City was constructed 10 kilometres / 6 miles away – today's Casco Viejo. The remaining ruins of Panama la Vieja (Old Panama) are open to visitors.

From 1538 to 1821, Panama was governed by the Spanish and many of the indigenous tribes were suppressed and eventually eradicated as had happened elsewhere in the Americas. By the 17th century, the Cueva had disappeared completely. The only indigenous tribe defending itself successfully from colonisation was the Kuna. Today, the Kuna honour their traditions and life in an independent territory within Panama.

On November 28, 1821, Panama, together with several other countries, declared its independence from Spain. Panama united with Colombia, Venezuela and Ecuador to form Gran

Colombia, under the leadership of Simon Bolivar. In the ensuing decades, Panama tried to become independent from Gran Colombia but never succeeded. Despite this, Panama still enjoyed a high degree of autonomy.

After the failed attempt of a French investor group to complete the construction of the Panama Canal between 1881 and 1889, the plans for the canal were sold to the US. In 1903, Panama, with support of the US, finally declared its independence from Colombia.

In exchange for US assistance, Panama conceded an area 80 kilometres / 50 miles long and 16 kilometres / 10 miles wide to the US, which became the Panama Canal Zone. In 1977, the United States and Panama signed the Torrijos-Carter Treaty, committing the US to handing back the Panama Canal Zone to the Panamanian government by the end of the millennium.

In the 1980s, relations between the US and Panama deteriorated. In 1983, General Manuel Noriega became president of Panama and ruled the country dictatorially. In 1988, Noriega was accused of drug trafficking in the US and lost the Panamanian elections of 1989 but did not accept the results and accused the US of election fraud. The US responded by mobilising troops in Panama and on 20 December 1989, began invading Panama under covert operations known as 'Just Cause'. During the operation, Noriega was captured and arrested and served a 30-year sentence in a US prison. He died in Panama City in May 2017 at age 83.

On December 1999, the Panama Canal and the Panama Canal Zone were handed over to the Panamanian government and US troops withdrew from Panama in accordance with the Torrijos-Carter-Treaty.



Panama Canal

The Panama Canal connects Panama City on the Pacific Ocean with Colón on the Atlantic Ocean. Before the canal was constructed, the shortest sailing route from the east to west coast of South America included the circumnavigation of Cape Horn. With the opening of the canal, this route was shortened by approximately 19,312 kilometres / 11,806 miles.

Passage through the canal includes three sets of locks and two artificial lakes, Gatún and Miraflores. The difference in elevation between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans is only 24 centimetres / 9.4 inches; however, ships are lifted to the height of Gatún Lake, 26 metres / 85 feet above sea level, to cross the continental divide. The locks are operated by gravity only. Each filling of the locks uses 197 million litres / 52 million gallons of fresh water!

After Vasco Nuñez de Balboa discovered the Pacific Ocean in 1513, the idea of a canal connecting the Atlantic and Pacific oceans was first raised by the Spanish King, Karl V in 1523. At that time, it was not possible to actually build the canal and it was not until after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 that the plans became concrete.

A French conglomerate started work on the canal in 1881. It was assumed that construction of the Panama Canal would be as easy as the Suez Canal. Unfortunately, the conglomerate learned that constructing a canal through the hilly jungle of Panama is something quite different to that of a flat desert.

In 1889, with only one sixth of the canal complete, work ceased. During the eight years of construction approximately 22,000 people died of malaria and yellow fever – more than 7.5 deaths per day. In 1902, the entire project was sold to the US for US\$40 million.

As a result of the sale and with the support of the US, Panama declared its independence from Colombia in 1903. Through a treaty, Panama granted the US the occupation and use of a strip of land 160 kilometres / 99 miles wide and 804 kilometres / 500 miles across the Isthmus – the Canal Zone. In 1906 the US started construction of the canal and on 15 August 1914, the first ship successfully navigated the Panama Canal.

Due to the US administrative sovereignty over the Canal Zone, various conflicts between Panama and the US arose. In 1977, former US president Jimmy Carter signed the Torrijos-Carter Treaty, which regulated the return of the canal to the Panamanian government by the end of the millennium. Handover took place on 31 December 1999. Since then, the Panama Canal Authority (ACP) manages and administrates the canal.

Widening the Panama Canal was discussed for several years. In a constitutional referendum held in 2006, 78 per cent of the Panamanian people voted in favour of extending the canal. Construction began on 3 September 2007 and in June 2016, tankers carrying liquefied natural gas entered the newly widened locks and passed through the canal for the first time.



People and Culture

Ethnically, the majority of the population is mestizo (mixed Spanish and indigenous ancestry) or a mix of indigenous, European, Chinese and West Indian ancestry and due to Panama's unique location, immigrants have added to its diverse cultural mix. The indigenous population comprises approximately eight per cent of the population and is composed of seven distinct groups: Kuna, Embera, Waounan, Ngobe, Bugle, Nassau and Teribe.

The majority of the population lives in urban areas, with more than half the population living in the Panama City –Colón metropolitan corridor. Approximately 85 per cent of Panamanians are Roman-Catholics, the rest are either Protestants or follow traditional beliefs such as those practised by indigenous tribes.

Time Zone

Panama is in Greenwich Meantime (GMT) zone GMT-5.

Money

The official currency of Panama is the balboa (B). The centesimo is the balboa's subunit with 100 centesimos to the balboa. The US dollar has been legal currency in Panama since 1904 and the exchange rate is 1B to 1USD. Centésimo coins are also available in the same denominations as US coins although US coins are also accepted. Only coins are used in Panama.

Major credit cards are accepted in Panama, especially in tourist destinations. International debit and credit cards may be used to withdraw money from local ATMs (ATMs may not be available in some locations in the interior).

Banks are open from 8.00 am to 3:00 pm Monday to Friday. Most local banks also open Saturdays from 9.00 am to 12.00 midday.

Please check websites such as www.oanda.com or www.xe.com for up-to-date exchange rates prior to your departure.

Long Distance Dialling, Emergency Numbers

Country code: + 507

Ambulance: 103

Police: 104

Emergencies: 911

Climate

Average temperatures in Panama City range from 28°C during the day to 21°C at night. On most days you will feel a refreshing ocean breeze so that it does not feel too hot. In the interior, the weather is generally hot, although it cools down significantly at night. Temperatures range from 32°C during the day to 21°C in the evening generally all year round.

The climate is much cooler in elevated areas. The different mountain ranges result in temperatures varying from 10–19°C.

Humidity is high at approximately 80 per cent. The wettest months are from May to November when it is not uncommon to receive over a centimetre of rain every day. The dry season is from December to mid-April.

Language

Panama's official language is Spanish. English is often spoken in major cities and tourist destinations.

National Holidays

New Year's Day, Mourning Day, Carnival, Good Friday, Labor Day, Independence Day from Colombia, Colón Day, The Uprising of Los Santos, Independence Day from Spain, Mother's Day, Christmas Day.



Cuisine

Panama is not a country known for its cuisine. Panamanian cuisine is a mix of African, Spanish and Indigenous cooking techniques. Many of its dishes are heavily influenced by the cuisine of other Central American countries, the Caribbean as well as Europe.

Corn is a staple ingredient and corn-based dishes are made using the kernel cooked in water and then ground to obtain a flour to make dough. Fresh corn is also used in some dishes. Some of the main specialties are:

Breakfast

Tortillas: tortillas are very popular for breakfast but these are not Mexican-style tortillas. In Panama a tortilla is a half-inch thick round of corn dough deep-fried and usually served with a melting piece of cheese on top and eggs. This is a dish that will stick to your innards all morning!

Hojaldras: these are Panamanian doughnuts, a flattened piece of dough deep-fried and served hot with sugar sprinkled on top. Delicious – especially with a cup of fine Panamanian coffee.

Patacones: fried plantain, which is still green, cut in rounds, pressed, deep-fried and salted. Patacones can be ordered as an appetiser for lunch or dinner, as a starchy vegetable side dish, or as a great snack.

Platano Maduro: ripe plantains cut in long slices and sautéed in oil. Ripe plantains are sweet and are a sweet side dish that accompanies most typical Panamanian meals. Platanos tentación is a popular way to prepare them in a caramelised sugar sauce seasoned with some cinnamon and nutmeg.

Carimañola: a delicious roll made with dough from the tropical root of the yucca and stuffed with meat and boiled eggs.

Ceviche: raw fish or seafood marinated in freshly-squeezed lime juice, salt, and served with red onion, and sometimes corn.

Sancocho: sancocho is the national dish. It is a hearty chicken soup typical of countryside fare and a rural favourite. In addition to chicken pieces, sancocho has a starchy root called ñame and is spiced with culandro – a leaf similar in taste to cilantro.

Ropa Vieja: literally translated as ‘old clothes’, this is a beef stew containing spices like black pepper, cumin and oregano. The beef is slow-cooked then shredded (pulled meat). The name comes from a legend that tells of a man who ran out of food while serving his guests and made a stew from one of his garments instead!

Corvina: do not leave Panama before tasting its premier fish, known locally as corvina and internationally as sea bass. This delectable fish has absolutely no fishy taste. It is served with a variety of sauces, fried or used to make ceviche and is a feature on the menus of most Panamanian restaurants.

Tamales: same name but different to the Mexican kind. Panamanian tamales are a square burrito and are made from a dough of ground corn with a filling of chicken or pork with spices. Tamales are wrapped in a banana leaf and boiled rather than steamed.

Tropical fruits: Panama’s best desserts are its bountiful and inexpensive tropical fruits. These include: papayas, mangoes, pineapples, melons and maracuyá (a large and sweet variety of passionfruit) and guanabana (soursop).

Christmas

Traditional Christmas dishes usually include chicken tamales, rice with chicken, grilled pork, turkey and stuffing. Bowls of fruit and fruitcake are also placed on the tables to accompany the dishes. Eggnog is also served during Christmas.

For more information please contact your travel agent, or Aurora Expeditions on:

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