



JOURNEY LATIN AMERICA



PANAMA, COSTA RICA, NICARAGUA, HONDURAS, GUATEMALA ALCIÓN TOUR

DISCOVERY JOURNEYS: SMALL GROUP HOLIDAYS

CENTRAL AMERICAN DISCOVERY

Setting off from the Panama Canal, our Alción tour reveals the highlights of five of seven states crammed into the diminutive isthmus that joins Mexico to South America. Crowned by a chain of volcanoes, dotted with dreamy lakes, lined by beaches of coral whiteness, blessed with a balmy mix of tropical and temperate climate and punctuated with a multitude of rustic indigenous villages, Mayan ruins and colonial towns, these lands are an alluring destination for visitors. The area is especially rich in biodiversity, and extensive national parks have been established in the sultry rainforests, along the sunny coastline and on the rocky mountain slopes, where the profuse wildlife may be observed in tranquillity. We can explore delightful towns, hike, ride, raft, shop, snorkel, watch birds - there is something to indulge every enthusiasm.



BRIEF ITINERARY

- Day 1 Fly UK to Panama City.
- Day 2 Explore Panama City.
- Days 3,4 Explore Boquete in the Panamanian Highlands.
- Days 5-7 Stay on the coast at Bocas del Toro and Colón Island.
- Day 8 Cross into Costa Rica, continue to San José.
- Days 10,11 Visit the Monteverde cloud forest.
- Days 12,13 Bus into Nicaragua and stay on Ometepe Island, Lake Nicaragua.
- Days 14,15 Drive to colonial Granada.
- Day 16 Continue to the charming town of León.
- Day 17 Bus to Honduras' capital, Tegucigalpa.
- Days 18,19 Visit the Mayan ruins of Copán.
- Days 20,21 Cross into Guatemala and on to the atmospheric town of Antigua.
- Day 22 Depart Guatemala City, arriving UK day 23

Day 1, Sat:

UK clients depart, reaching Panama City late Saturday evening. The tour leader or our local representatives will meet everyone arriving by air today at the airport.

Day 2, Sun:

We spend the day exploring Central America's most cosmopolitan, wealthy and spectacularly located capital. The city is built along the picturesque Panama Bay. The modern Hong Kong style skyscrapers of the Paitilla district dominate the skyline at one end, whilst at the other lies the decaying and peeling colonial heart of San Felipe. We visit San Felipe in the morning and wander around the narrow streets with their overhanging balconies and lovely plazas. Our city tour continues to Panama Viejo, the original settlement of Panama City until 1671 when it was sacked by the infamous British buccaneer Henry Morgan. We also drive out of town to the Miraflores Locks on the Panama Canal, one of the great engineering achievements of all time. As the excellent Visitors' Centre explains, the project was started in 1880 by the French diplomat Ferdinand de Lesseps, after his success with the recently inaugurated Suez Canal, but was only completed in 1914 by the Americans, who assumed ownership. To the delight of most Panamanians the canal was returned to Panama on December 31, 1999.

Day 3, Mon:

We board a bus for the journey across Western Panama to the city of David, where we change buses for the onward trip to Boquete.

Day 4, Tue:

Nestling in the foothills of the Baru Volcano, Boquete, with its cool clean air, comes as a pleasant respite from hot, humid and frenetic Panama City. This little town is in the heart of Panama's coffee-growing country. We use it as a very pleasant base from which to explore the area. Optional excursions on offer include walking, horse-riding, bird watching, a visit to the hot springs or to one of the coffee farms in the area. The region's rivers are rich in trout - and you'll find it on offer in many local eateries.

Day 5, Wed:

We take a bus heading northwards across the continental divide, to the Caribbean coast. It's a beautiful journey along a winding road through fine mountain scenery, descending to Almirante, a railhead for the export of bananas in the steamy lowlands. From here we take the ferry to the archipelago of Bocas del Toro, some 24km offshore. In calm waters the journey takes about half an hour.

The islands of Bocas del Toro remain refreshingly isolated from mainstream tourism, but it won't be long

before this densely forested archipelago of secluded bays, coral reefs and Guaymi Indian settlements is firmly on the map. There are six large islands and countless smaller ones. Water taxis ferry local people and the relatively few tourists between the small communities that dot the archipelago. Only the largest island, Isla Colon, has any roads. There's one major settlement here - just called Bocas town for short - which we use as a base for the next three nights.

Bocas is an unkempt, battered-looking but charming little seaside town of old, lurching wooden buildings and a few ungainly modern ones. Even though there's no beach in town, the burgeoning number of lodgings, simple seafood restaurants and little bars makes Bocas a great place to relax. For now it firmly retains its local feel, and you can expect to find friendly smiles from the creole-speaking inhabitants and curious stares from the children on their way home from school. Evenings are balmy and generally low key, with activity restricted to the huddle of welcoming little watering holes along the shore. The archipelago also supports very traditional communities of Guaymi Indians, who fish for a living. They inhabit the quaint looking thatched houses on stilts, which you'll see along the islands' shorelines, and travel by canoe, relying on paddle power to get around.

Days 6-7, Thurs - Fri:

We have two full days to explore the archipelago. One particularly worthwhile optional day trip is to the Bastimentos National Marine Park. Swathed in lush jungle pervaded by prolific wildlife, and blessed with beautiful white sand beaches, Bastimentos Island, together with its coral atolls, forms a national park of outstanding beauty. The coral reefs offer good snorkelling opportunities. (Snorkels can be hired in Bocas.)

Day 8, Sat:

Back on the mainland, a short, scenic road journey through lush countryside brings us to the Costa Rican border. An anomaly in Central America, Costa Rica has long been a haven of stability- there's a democratic government and no national army.

The journey to the capital, San José, could involve several changes of bus along the way. Along the straight dirt road from Sixaola to Bribri vast tropical plantations stretch on either side as far as the eye can see. This is Costa Rica's only indigenous area. After an hour or so we arrive back at the Caribbean coast, and drive for another couple of hours along the picturesque, palm-lined highway to Limón. Costa Rica's creole Caribbean coastline is culturally a world apart from the rest of this hispanic republic. Here we'll head inland towards San José, and embark on a four-hour climb into the highlands of the Meseta Central. This is one of Costa

Rica's most beautiful routes; the last hour of the journey - daylight permitting - affords glorious views over the cloud forests of Braulio Carrillo National Park before we arrive at San José.

Day 9, Sun:

We have a free day in San José, with time to either explore the city and its excellent gold and jade museums, or to take one of the many optional excursions available. You may choose to visit one of the nearby superbly organised national parks, such as Poas Volcano, Sarapiquí River or the Braulio Carrillo cloud forest. For the more adventurous, white water rafting can be arranged on the Reventazón or Pacuare rivers. A day spent cascading down one of these jungle clad tropical canyons may well be one of the highlights of the entire trip.

Days 10-11, Mon-Tue:

We board a battered old bus for the four-hour journey to Santa Elena on the edge of the Monteverde National Park. This is a magical sanctuary of verdant, dripping cloud forest high up in the Costa Rican mountains. Monteverde is home to the elusive but "must-see" resplendent quetzal, a bird often used to symbolise Central America. We have a full day to explore this area and we include a guided tour of the Cloud Forest Reserve. There are also possibilities for optional excursions such as a visit to the butterfly farm or one of the numerous private reserves.

Day 12, Wed:

We continue towards Nicaragua, the journey starting with a steep but spectacular descent to the coastal plains, and, weather permitting, we may catch a glimpse of the imposing Arenal Volcano. Be prepared for a dramatic rise in temperature. We pass through Liberia, a tranquil provincial capital in northern Costa Rica. After two hours we arrive at the border with Nicaragua. Tourism is still in its infancy and the infrastructure is not yet well organised enough to handle many tourists. The difference between the two countries is striking. The stability, tranquillity and relative affluence of Costa Rica is in marked contrast to the position Nicaragua finds itself in: it has long been plagued by economic and political uncertainty. The people are some of the poorest in Latin America and have suffered much in the past fifty years (through dictatorship, revolution, civil war, hurricanes, and earthquakes). The former Sandinista President, Daniel Ortega, was re-elected to power in a democratic election in November 2006.

We head onwards for our journey to San Jorge on the shores of Lake Nicaragua. From San Jorge we catch the next available boat across the lake to the exquisite Ometepe Island.

Day 13, Thurs:

Ometepe is a serene and as yet totally undeveloped island. Even in comparison with the rest of Nicaragua, the infrastructure is basic with only rough roads and very simple accommodation. Much of the island is still covered in primary rainforest and home to many different species of monkeys and parrots. It is also famous for its pre-Columbian stone statues and petroglyphs, carved by the Chorotega Indians centuries ago. There are opportunities for scenic walks on the slopes of the island's two imposing volcanoes (Concepción and Madera) or along one of Ometepe's deserted volcanic beaches. Horse-riding and fishing are also options here. For the less active, this is a great place to relax by simply lounging in a hammock overlooking the lake.

Days 14-15, Fri-Sat:

We head back to the mainland and on to the evocative and dilapidated Spanish colonial town of Granada. This charming city was once one of the wealthiest in Latin America, a staging post for the shipment of looted gold. The architecture reflects this one-time prosperity: huge wooden doors open on to shady patios in once-aristocratic houses. Efforts are now being made to restore the city's faded splendour and newly promoted tourism has been a trigger for the establishment of many new bars and restaurants.

From here we enjoy a trip to Masaya National Park, visiting volcanic crater lakes, the old hilltop fort of Coyotepe, the impressive and still active Masaya volcano and the town of Masaya itself. The handicraft market in Masaya is well known for its intricate handmade hammocks.

There is also time for an optional excursion to Las Isletas, a 365-island archipelago, formed 20,000 years ago when the Mombacho Volcano erupted, hurling its top half into Lake Nicaragua in giant masses of rock, ash, and lava. Today Las Isletas are a haven of birdlife and luxurious getaway homes for the wealthy Nicaraguans, and for us a beautiful spot to see the sun set over the mainland.

Day 16, Sun:

Today we route north across dusty volcanic plains to León, via Managua, the Nicaraguan capital. Managua is a microcosm of the whole country: compelling, disorganised and vibrant. We continue northwards, passing close to the Momotombo Volcano on the way to León, another of Nicaragua's restored colonial gems and the perfect antidote to the chaos of Managua. Here time is best spent just wandering around the numerous shady plazas and ornate churches adorning the town centre. Even during colonial times León had a strong liberal tradition (as opposed to the conservatism of Granada),

and to this day it has remained the country's radical and intellectual centre with a thriving university population. The Sandinista link is still visible today with a few large murals and revolutionary graffiti plastered over some of the town's white adobe walls.

We may also have time to visit the pristine Pacific Coastline at PoneLOYa, a short 18km drive South of Leon.

Day 17, Mon:

We board an early morning bus that will take us across the border and into Honduras. The bus travels up towards Tegucigalpa, the Honduran capital, giving wonderful views of pine-clad mountains en route.

Like Nicaragua, this is a poor country where the gulf between the rich and poor is all too apparent. After our late afternoon arrival, we have only a few hours to explore. With an unassuming central plaza and narrow streets it lacks the feel of a capital city. In the 1980s this region became the focus of US counter-insurgency operations in Central America. The prevalence of Dunkin Donuts and Pizza Hut seems to be one of the more obvious legacies of that era.

Days 18-19, Tue-Wed:

Rural Honduras beckons and we are up at the crack of dawn for the full day's ride to Copán, along with Tikal the most impressive of Mayan ruined complexes. This region of Western Honduras is a warm, remote province of velvety green hills and rushing rivers dotted with whitewashed colonial villages, inhabited by hospitable people who still use horses as their main form of transport. Its genial atmosphere comes from the relative prosperity gained through trade in coffee and tobacco and through tourism stimulated by the Mayan ruins.

We stay in Copán Ruinas, an attractive cobbled village that is ten minutes' walk from the site. There are opportunities for hill walking, visiting hot springs or just relaxing in the village square. The major attraction, however, is the archaeological site and the superb new site museum; both of which we visit the following day.

Copán is unique - not so much for its impressive temples but for the exquisite stelae and their artwork: huge intricately carved statues depicting the complicated history of the area and all of its great rulers. One of the highlights of this incredible site is the imperious hieroglyphic stairway, with each of its 63 steps sculpted with hundreds of different glyphs describing important events in Copán's rise to prominence among the elite city-states of the Maya World. Copán came to flourish between 250 and 900AD, when its prosperity mysteriously declined. Within about 100 years this once sophisticated city had been reclaimed by the jungle, only to be rediscovered by Spanish conquistadors in the late 16th Century and subsequently excavated 300 years later.

Days 20-21, Thurs - Fri:

The Guatemalan border is a scenic, ten-minute drive from Copán. We continue to Antigua. There is a marked change in temperature as we climb to the highlands. The humidity dissipates, the heat is benign and the nights pleasantly cool. 'Land of eternal spring' is an accurate accolade adopted by the Guatemalans to describe the climate of the western highland region where the city is located.

Guatemala is unique in Central America: a mysterious, timeless country where half the population is Mayan Indian. Many, especially the women in the highlands, still dress in their traditional hand-woven clothing, similar to that which was worn over a thousand years ago.

Antigua is a colonial jewel of cobbled streets with overhanging red tiled roofs. The town is dotted with an abundance of huge ruined churches, convents and monasteries: a testament to a time when Antigua was the capital and main religious centre. It seems that every doorway opens onto an intimate leafy courtyard planted with vivid flowers. The picture is completed by the dramatic backdrop of smouldering volcanoes looming over the town, reminding us how this city was destroyed in 1773. Antigua is a welcome place for the traveller to relax and there is time to unwind, enjoy good food and the best shopping in Guatemala, or just wander around the ruined convents with their lovingly tended gardens.

Day 22, Sat:

UK clients depart, arriving home on Day 23, Sun.

TRIP PROFILE

Transport:

11 road journeys (longest eight hours, some by public bus, four boat trips.)

Accommodation:

A variety of simple hotels and guesthouses, all with private bathroom.

Meals:

Not included except for breakfast on days 2 & 5-7.

Included excursions:

Panama City tour; Monteverde Reserve guided tour; Masaya Volcano National Park; guided tour of Copán ruins.

Group size:

Min 4, max 16

Summary of nights:

23 days, 21 nights: Panama City 2, Boquete 2, Bocas del Toro 3, San José 2, Monteverde 2, Ometepe Island 2, Granada 2, León 1, Tegucigalpa 1, Copán 2, Antigua 2

Included in the tour cost

- Services of a Journey Latin America tourleader
- All land and air transport (including international flights)
- Accommodation and excursions as specified.

Not included in the tour cost

- Optional excursions.
- Meals other than specified above.
- Tips.
- Airport Security tax.
- Border entrance and exit fees (total approx \$18) to be paid locally.

A budget of approximately US\$40 per person per day is suggested to cover the cost of meals. If you wish to do all the optional excursions (including rafting) please bring an additional US\$220.

Accommodation

We should emphasise that on our Discovery Journeys the standard of accommodation varies. We aim to keep the price competitive while assuring the basic comforts. Hotels / hostels are comfortable and charming in most places, however some may be purely functional. All hotels are clean and almost all will have a private bathroom with hot water. For those who prefer more luxurious comfort we would redirect you to the Classic Tours or Bespoke brochures.

Climate

The trip covers five countries with climates ranging from lowland tropical to more temperate zones in the highlands. May - October journeys should encounter high temperatures (35°C) and high humidity in the lowlands. There may be rainfall in most countries as the 'official' rainy season is May to October. December - April departures will still encounter high temperatures in the lowlands, but be prepared for cool evenings in Boquete, San Jose, Monteverde and the Guatemalan highlands with temperatures falling to around 5°C. Rainfall and humidity will be lower at this time.

Money

Take US\$ cash (up to your insurance limit). Credit cards are widely accepted and you may be able to get a cash advance, the procedure can be time-consuming so do not depend on this method to finance your trip. Cash machines are increasingly available so take your PIN number as well. Possibly take some traveller's cheques (American Express is the most widely accepted brand).

The unit of currency in Panama is the US dollar (locals refer to it as the Balboa). In Costa Rica it is the Colon, in Nicaragua the Córdoba, in Honduras the Lempira and in Guatemala the Quetzal, although US dollars are widely accepted in all countries.

Vaccinations

It is essential you bring an official Yellow Fever Certificate, which you should carry with the rest of your travel documents. Preventative vaccinations are recommended against the following: typhoid, polio, tuberculosis, tetanus and Hepatitis A. You should also consult your GP for advice on malaria tablets.

Clothing and equipment

Bring plenty of light cotton clothing and good, comfortable walking shoes. Some warm items and waterproof jackets are also necessary for all departures. We suggest that you plan to 'layer' your clothing: it is easier and more efficient to put on a couple of light layers rather than take one thick jumper, for instance. Sandals are a good option as informal footwear for evenings. Protection against the sun and mosquito repellent are essential. A backpack is the most sensible and comfortable way to carry your belongings.

Visas

Holders of full British passports do not require visas for any of the countries visited. You must, however, have six months' validity on your passport from the date of your return. Other nationalities should refer to our Briefing Dossier and check with the relevant Consulates.

Airport taxes

International departure tax from Guatemala is included in the cost of the flight, however there is a separate \$3USD Airport Security tax which must be paid locally.

Supporting charity

In Antigua we stay in Hotel Posada Lazos Fuertes, a non-profit making hotel whose proceeds go the charity 'Safe Passage'. The organisation works with the poorest at-risk children of families working in the Guatemala City garbage dump. The charity welcomes any form of donation; other than much needed funds, products such as babywipes, lice shampoo and trainers are also gratefully received. For more details about Safe Passage's work please refer to their website: www.passage.org.



The UK's No 1 travel specialist to Latin America

12 & 13 Heathfield Terrace, Chiswick, London W4 4JE

T 020 8747 8315 F 020 8742 1312

E groups@journeylatinamerica.co.uk

www.journeylatinamerica.co.uk