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S; 2004-0728-F; 2005-0989-F

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OA/ID Number:	13752
Folder ID Number:	13752-001

Folder Title:
Visit of Violeta Chamorro 4/17/91 [OA 6897] [4]

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A HISTORY OF CONFLICT

by
JOHN MITCHEM

Throughout its history, Central America has been influenced by events beyond its borders. Whether during the pirate-era gun play between Great Britain and France in the days of the Spanish Main or the Contra/Sandinista struggle of modern Nicaragua, the isthmus has served as a testing ground for superpower frictions. Today the region once again is being washed over by waves of international events, but this time there is much cause for hope.

The cessation of open conflict in Nicaragua and the free election of Violeta Chamorro stands as a pivotal sign that the tide has turned; that Washington, Moscow, and Havana are elsewhere occupied and may cease using the region for a proxy bloodletting. As messy an affair as the U.S. invasion of Panama and the extradition of Manuel Antonio Noriega was, it should be remembered that, according to polls, 80 percent of Panamanians had had enough of their dictator and supported the American action to end his regime—bearing in mind, of course, that it was U.S. influence that had installed him in the first place.

With democratically elected governments now found from Chiapas to the Darien rain forest, there is a temptation to presume that all the suffering and strife is over for the Central American people. This is not the case. The roots of the Central American conflicts run deep. The "narcocracy" of Noriega, the institutionalization of a fascistic military elite in Guatema-

la, the death squads of El Salvador, the Sandinistas' uneven experiment in socialism and America's churlish response with an economic boycott and the Contra war, were all symptoms of a deep-seated sickness. The vital signs are improving, but lingering signs of illness are there to be found. In 1989, the Faribundo Marti Liberation Front (FMLN) mounted an offensive against the government in El Salvador that took the war to the mansions of the country's oligarchy, and in Guatemala, in spite of the democratically-elected President Vinicio Cerezo Arevalo, the military has its tentacles deeper than ever into the economy. Students and human rights activists still "disappear."

For visitors to the area, the external signs of the conflict have evaporated somewhat; but the struggle for democracy, for economic justice, for intellectual freedom, goes on.

Central America's history is the history of exploitation—exploitation of mineral wealth, of agricultural produce, and of people. There was never the spectacular influx of immigrants that produced the high level of industry and the varied economies in North and South America. What resources were available were squabbled over, and authoritarian rule and military conquest were favored methods of controlling the resources.

Any culture is the product of its traditions and history, but in Central America the ancient and the modern live side by side every day, often overlapping, often operating simultaneously. The methods of cultivation employed by the *campesino*, or peasant (the word doesn't carry the pejorative implications of its English translation), in Central America are identical to those employed thousands of years ago. The social and political systems of the isthmus today share the same traditions of deference to authoritarian rule, military resolution of conflicts, and politically powerful religion found in the ancient cultures of the Maya. Central America has walked uneasily into the modern world, and ancient traditions appear to die hard.

The Preclassic Period

Central America's first highly developed culture evolved among the Olmec, in the area of what is today Veracruz, Mexico, near the Tuxtla Mountain range, from 1200 B.C. to A.D. 100. The Olmec are known for their art objects, notably anthropomorphized jaguars and massive, round-headed busts of mysterious figures with thick lips, wide noses, and some kind of helmetlike cap. Some anthropologists have broadly speculated the possibility of these sculptures representing some African visitors, but given the importance of fertility and virility in Olmec myth, the heads probably represent healthy overfed children or men.

Olmec society was highly artistic and employed advanced mathematics. Their villages had crafts specialists who never worked in agriculture, and large pools of available labor were used for urban engineering projects. Olmec society had a highly organized leadership, able to direct numerous workers and oversee sophisticated commerce. It was a society of village agriculturalists ruled by high priests who inherited their power at birth. The Olmec explored far and wide, and Olmec-style carvings, paintings, ceramics, and figurines have been found from Central Mexico to El Salvador and Costa Rica. It was also a society, like those that followed it, founded on military conquest and colonization.

The Classic Maya

While Europe was still mired in the Dark Ages, the Maya civilization reached its peak. The empire covered all of Guatemala and Belize and parts of Honduras, El Salvador, and Mexico. The classic Maya were a people of great intellectual dynamism and wide-ranging, vivid creative activity. They enjoyed great public architecture and an explosion of energy in the arts, commerce, mathematics, and astronomy. They were a people who witnessed the rise of urbanization and sophisticated engineering. They possessed an intricate written literature based on pantheistic religions and elaborate myth. They had a complex system of theocratic government and a multilayered social system.

The greatest intellectual achievements of the ancient Maya were in mathematics, astronomy, and the development of written language. The Maya had sophisticated, interlocking religious and secular calendars; a mathematic system based, like our decimal system, on the zero; and an intricate knowledge of astronomy, directly inherited from the Olmec. Mayan astronomers predicted solar eclipses and mapped out the cycles of Venus. The Maya were the only people in the pre-Columbian Americas to possess a developed writing system. The other ancient cultures of Mesoamerica—including the Aztec of Mexico, who postdated the Maya—used only rudimentary symbols. The most famous example of their written language is the Dresden Codex, a 24-foot-long book of folding screens now housed in the State Library of Dresden. The Dresden Codex was a divinatory treatise on astronomy with tables of eclipse dates and five panels devoted to the revolutions of the planet Venus.

But despite their complex intellectual greatness, the Maya were curiously inept. The Maya never developed the wheel—they had no wheeled vehicles and no potter's wheel. They had no beasts of burden or draft animals. And the Maya civilization was a stone-age culture. The ancient cultures of the Old World had their iron and bronze ages, whereas the Maya used only stone blades and tools. Indians of South America were working in gold for 2,000 years before the Spanish Conquest, but the Mezoamerican waited until A.D. 1000.

The exploitive nature of the Maya culture should not be forgotten. Whatever greatness there was was achieved through outrageous oppression. The great levels of education in the sciences and mathematics reached by the priestly classes were at the expense of thousands who toiled the land so that others could live in luxury. The magnificent architectural monuments created by the Maya were built by slaves.

The rise of the Maya cities centered in the Petén of Guatemala and adjacent lowlands; the areas of Chiapas, Tobasco, and southern Campeche in Mexico; Belize and western Honduras. For the most part, Maya cities were located on rivers or in uplands between river systems. By the fifth century B.C. village farming communities had formed in the Petén, and by the time of Christ, buildings were already being constructed on top of the ruins of previous structures.

The greatest Maya center was at Tikal, near the present town of Flores, in the Guatemalan department of Petén. The site is dominated by ceremonial buildings in the form of truncated pyramids, arranged around central plazas that served ceremonial and athletic functions. The largest of the

central lowland Maya cities, it is estimated to have had a population of more than 50,000 at its peak (some say as high as 100,000) with a population density of 600 per square mile. The site was surrounded by suburbs extending three or four miles in every direction.

Tikal's Temple IV is the highest Mayan pyramid standing, at 212 feet. The pyramids were constructed of limestone blocks, carved with obsidian blades and set with mortar. The truncated tops of the pyramids served astronomical and religous functions, and ceremonial fires burned on the broad stairs leading upward. Some human sacrifices took place on the top of the pyramids, but anthropologists today conclude that human sacrifice was practiced on special religious occasions, not as a matter of common practice.

By A.D. 900 the great Maya ceremonial centers were quiet. To this day, historians can't target the reason for the Maya decline, although a rapid, dramatic decrease in population and activity seems to have taken place. It is thought that the social structure centered around the powerful high priests broke down completely since there is evidence that the palaces were occupied by peasants, who cooked food on the once-sacred steps, discarding garbage in a haphazard manner.

The Maya today number about two million, and they live alongside the overgrown ruins of their ancient monuments. They have mingled to a great degree with the Latin, and most speak Spanish, although 15 dialects of Maya are still spoken. The Maya are often short and sturdy of build, with broad heads, flat noses, and copper-colored skin. Many are extremely religious; Catholicism as practiced in the Maya areas of Central America has deeply animist overtones reflecting religions that predate Christianity here. The Maya are open and friendly but they are in many ways a humbled people. For the most part they do not seem to share their ancestors' passion for learning or leadership. They are today a people threatened with cultural decimation as modernization, war, migration to Spanish-speaking urban centers, and the exhaustion of the land conspire to break the patterns of their ancient lifestyle.

The Conquest

Eat, eat, thou hast bread
Drink, drink, thou hast water
On that day, dust possess the earth
On that day, a blight is on the face of the earth
On that day, a cloud rises
On that day, a mountain rises
On that day, a strong man seizes the land
On that day, things fall to ruin
On that day, the tender leaf is destroyed
On that day, the dying eyes are closed
On that day, three signs are on the tree
On that day, three generations hang there
On that day, the battle flag is raised
And they are scattered afar in the forest

—*The Seventh Prophecy of Chilam Balam,* 15th-century Mayan book of prophecy. Translated by D. G. Brinton.

Central America was not settled by the Europeans; it was conquered. The men who came from Spain weren't religious puritans looking for land to farm. They did not come to create a representative democracy of hard-working farmers. They did not come to create anything. They were soldiers looking for riches to loot. The conquistadores came to Central America to extract whatever they could (gold, principally), as rapidly as possible, and then return to Spain. The early first decades of the Conquest are characterized by vicious bickering, arguments over conquered territories, claims, counterclaims, and accusations. Whatever misfortunate Indians got in the way were quickly eliminated, but there was almost always a priest handy to baptize them before they died.

Partly as a result of the feudal tradition in Spain, all measures of social or economic prestige in the colonies were a function of land—how much was owned and what it produced. Secondary to land ownership was labor ownership, and the conquistadores divided up the Indian communities in a merciless system of forced labor.

Central America was first claimed by Columbus, in July 1502, when he set foot on the island of Guanaja, in the Bay Islands off Honduras, on his fourth voyage to the New World. The principal activity of the Conquest's first decade was the capturing of thousands of Indians in order to bring them to work in the mines of the Caribbean island of Hispaniola, where natives were dying from overwork in large numbers. The first Spanish settlements in the isthmus, in the Darién of Panama, were beset by disease, shipwrecks, and hostile Indians. The Pacific was discovered in 1513 by Vasco Núñez de Balboa, who had stowed away on a ship from Hispaniola. Balboa came back with gold and legends of a great empire, almost certainly the Inca, somewhere to the south. A rival conqueror, Pedro Arias de Avila, commonly known as Pedrarias, explored north up the isthmus, while Balboa explored the south. Pedrarias founded the original settlement of Panamá in 1519, but not before he had Balboa convicted of treason and beheaded by a hastily gathered court.

By 1521, Hernán Cortés had defeated the Aztecs in Mexico. The Maya of the Yucatán were subdued by Francisco de Montejo in 1527. (The complete destruction of the Maya empire would not come about until 1697, when the last Maya leaders of the Petén were captured.) A second in command to Cortés, Pedro de Alvarado, established the kingdom of Guatemala in 1524. Guatemala City was founded in the Almolonga Valley in 1527. In Honduras, to the south, Alvarado linked up with Pedrarias, and the inevitable territorial squabble forced the Spanish to divide the territories of the isthmus. Spain's priority was on safe passage across the isthmus for the incredible fortunes in precious metal being looted from the Inca, and by 1520, Central America was already one of the world's most strategically vital areas.

Gold and silver mines were established early in the century, and when these were played out, settlers streamed in and established an agricultural base for the colonial economy. But from Panama to Mexico, the sixteenth century was violent with conflict—Indian revolts, followed by Spanish massacres in reprisal. Where the Indians lived in elaborate hierarchical societies, such as in Guatemala or parts of Mexico, the Conquest was simply a matter of removing tribal leadership and putting the masses to work. These are the regions of Mesoamerica in which one sees the greatest concentration of Indian populations today. But where the Indians were no-

madic and stubborn in their refusal to be enslaved, they were massacred en masse. For example, the Indians of Costa Rica were so fierce that they delayed Spanish settlement until 1561. Costa Rica today has the smallest Indian population of any Central American republic.

Once the initial violence of the Conquest was out of the way, the colonization of Central America became more economic than military. The Spanish took all the best Indian lands, destroying the system of cooperative farming, and reduced the natives to landless serfs. The *encomienda* was designed to replace slavery. It began as a tribute-collecting system, but eventually became a device for the steady, organized usurpation of all Indian lands and the enslavement of indigenous populations.

The Conquest also had its religious side. A voice of benevolence in this century of genocide was Farther Bartolomé de Las Casas, a Dominican priest who tried to institute less violent, more productive forms of Conquest. He convinced Spain to promulgate the New Laws of the Indies in 1542, which officially abolished the *encomienda*. The colonists vigorously opposed the New Laws. They considered Las Casas a troublemaker and a dangerous impediment to progress. The *repartimiento*, created in place of the *encomienda*, replaced tribute with forced part-time labor. Indians were supposed to work one week a month for the Spaniards, with the rest of their time free to tend their own land. But in practice, the Indians were still little more than slaves. Migrant, landless Indians still constitute the backbone of much of Central American agricultural production today.

From the very beginning of the colonial period, a sense of unity among the Central American territories proved elusive. Problems of geography and rivalry were so severe that by 1530, Guatemala, Chiapas (now part of Mexico), Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama functioned under separate royal orders. It was not until 1543 that the crown unified the region by creating the Audiencia de los Confines. This administrative unit fell apart in 1560, with Panama, Costa Rica, and Nicaragua under one *audiencia*, and Honduras, Guatemala, and Chiapas ruled by Mexico. By 1570, Guatemala was again independent of Mexico. Continuity of government also proved elusive, since the colonial administrators were, for the most part, a rotating corps of Spanish bureaucrats, few of whom remained in the colonies.

Economic development in the sixteenth century established patterns that are still evident today. The vast majority of early agricultural production was for domestic consumption, but indigo and cacao were exported. For the first 50 years, productive mines ensured considerable economic activity, but once these precious metals played out, Central America became something of a backwater in the Spanish empire.

In a move that would prove fateful for the region's development, Spain also actively discouraged intercolonial trade. The colonies were used as productive engines that shipped raw materials to Europe, imported finished products in return, and little else. Individual provinces within the colonies were isolated from each other. Transportation was developed to link the productive plantation lands to the ports, not with each other.

Economic and social and political power in the colonies lay in the hands of a small number who owned productive lands, controlled substantial numbers of Indians, and exhibited fidelity to Spain. What wealth was evident was spent on government buildings, religious institutions, and magnificent plantation homes, not on the general welfare.

The Decline of Spanish Power

The defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 marked the end of Spanish naval hegemony and the consequent inability of Spain to protect imperial power abroad. Other European powers stepped up their activities in the Caribbean, with France, Holland, and England vigorously trading in cacao, tobacco, and indigo. They could sell goods to the Central American colonies for much less than the Spanish could, and by the 1660s the British were so bold as to establish a settlement to cut lumber at the mouth of the Belize River.

The Caribbean coasts of Central America were subjected to devastating raids by pirates, who wreaked havoc on the Incan treasure routes. Rival European colonies were established at Jamaica (England), the Netherlands Antilles, and Haiti (France), and these territories served as bases of piracy. In 1642 the British attacked and seized Roatán, in the Bay Islands off Honduras, and with the complicity of Miskito Indians they soon were raiding the Caribbean coast as far south as Costa Rica.

In 1643 the Dutch sacked Trujillo, and the Spanish reacted by building a series of fortresses along the Caribbean coast. Fort San Felipe on the Río Dulce in Guatemala and Castillo Viejo on the Río San Juan in Nicaragua are still standing today. In 1665 and 1670, English buccaneers penetrated Nicaragua as far as Grenada, and the arch pirate Henry Morgan sacked Panama City in 1671. By 1680 the British controlled the entire Mosquito Coast (the Caribbean coast), and added slave hunting to their list of atrocities. The general underdevelopment of the Caribbean coast of the isthmus today can be traced back to this period, as can the thousands of English-speaking people who now live on the Caribbean coasts of Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, and Belize.

The ascent of the Bourbon Philip V plunged the Spanish empire into the War of the Spanish Succession. The eighteenth century would be a period of profound conflict. It was a period in which the European powers carved Central America up into spheres of influence and used the isthmus as a battleground for European strategic conflicts and economic rivalries.

The close relationship between the Bourbon monarchs of Spain and France pumped French ideas into the Spanish world and modified Spain's colonial policies. Anticlerical measures reduced the power of the church; commercial reform boosted trade; administrative reforms brought increased colonial efficiency; and a new emphasis was placed on the military defense of Spanish commerce in the isthmus. The Spanish Bourbons, aided by the French, sought to rid Central America of British influence, and new forts were constructed from Panama to the Yucatán. Britain countered by solidifying their grasp on the Mosquito Coast, and by 1748 the English had significant settlements at Black River, Cape Gracias a Dios, Bluefields, Roatán, and Belize. Spain's military responses were not effective. In 1754 the British stopped a Spanish expeditionary force of 1,500 in the Petén, and Belize remained in the British camp. In 1756, British-sponsored Miskito Indians captured and murdered the governor of Costa Rica.

By signing the Treaty of Paris in 1763, the British recognized Spanish sovereignty over Central America and agreed to dismantle their forts. In return, the British were allowed to continue their woodcutting settlement

at Belize. But the British did not dismantle their forts, and Belize soon had a quasi-colonial administration that was approving private land titles. The Miskito Indians, acting on behalf of their British clients, continued to harass the Spanish, and in 1779 Spain retaliated by routing the British from Roatán and Belize. The British then focused all their efforts on the Mosquito Coast, in an attempt to cut the isthmus in half. However, preoccupied with their insurrection in the newly declared United States, the British eventually ran out of steam, and the Treaty of Paris in 1783 ended the American Revolution and reaffirmed the 1763 treaty. The British left the Mosquito Coast and settled permanently in Belize after 1787. In 1796 the British again seized and reoccupied the Bay Islands of Honduras and increased their plunder of the Caribbean coast.

While Europe convulsed through the changes brought by the French Revolution, shifts of a more subtle but still profound sort were going on in the Central American colonies. The Creole aristocracy of the isthmus developed a new view of Spain—a view not founded in the idealization of the Spanish past that had previously characterized the colonies. These Creoles still elevated the cultural and spiritual values of the Spanish Conquest, but in the Spanish officials who administered the colonies, they saw scheming, calculating bureaucrats threatening their interests with taxation and plans for new land-hungry immigration. A new bitterness emerged against the Spanish, and a deep, parochial conservatism was born that survives in the Central American upper classes today.

These changes were underscored by the growth of the mixed Latin-Indian, or *Ladino* population in the region. The *Ladinos* emerged as merchants, artisans, and tradesmen, forming guilds and creating a petit bourgeoisie that served as a precursor of the middle classes that would play such a vital role in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In larger towns *Ladinos* were the majority of the population, but in the principal cities they often performed menial jobs or endured a new social malady—unemployment. In the cities crime among the *Ladinos* became a concern, and laws were promulgated by the aristocracy that forbade the bearing of arms by Indians or *Ladinos*. In 1806 laws were passed that outlawed knives, with violators subject to 200 lashes and six years of hard labor.

At the end of the eighteenth century, Indians were still a definite majority of the population in Guatemala (as they are today), but *Ladinos* and Spanish were the majority everywhere else in the region. Blacks, sprinkled in various concentrations up and down the length of the Caribbean coast, remained more a part of the British empire than of the Spanish.

By the time of the Spanish–French alliance against England in 1796, the British controlled the Atlantic. Spain had to turn to neutrals to carry on their Central American trade, and the United States was the logical choice. Capitalizing on their new opportunity, American shipping in the region increased radically. Madrid, seeing that the "neutrals" were seriously chipping away at its monopoly, revoked these rights in 1800, but American trading in the region would continue.

In 1804 war resumed between Spain and England. The Miskito Indians received renewed military aid from the British and privateering again increased. The Treaty of London in 1809 allied England and Spain against the French, and Central American trade boomed. Belize grew with new construction and increased shipping traffic. The Americans, their foot in the door, began to be seen as a long-term threat to the Spanish monopoly.

By the end of the eighteenth century, foreign ideas had permanently altered the order of Spanish reign. There were new calls for freer economic institutions, a more open political process, and some form of representative colonial government. New questions were raised about trade monopolies, the landed aristocracy, special privileges, and clerical power.

Independence

> The states of the isthmus from Panama to Guatemala will perhaps form a confederation. This magnificent location between the two great oceans could in time become the emporium of the world. Its canal will shorten the distances throughout the world, strengthen commercial ties with Europe, America, and Asia, and bring that happy region tribute from the four quarters of the globe. Perhaps some day the capital of the world may be located there, just as Constantine claimed Byzantium was the capital of the ancient world.
>
> Simón Bolívar, *(Jamaica Letter)*

Agustín de Iturbide's Plan de Igual in Mexico forced the topic of independence onto Guatemala in 1821. Indications were that an army of independent Mexico might invade Guatemala and annex Central America, so the question was not purely one of tearing away from Spain but a choice between annexation to Mexico and independence. Guatemala declared its independence on September 15, 1821. The abdication of Iturbide in Mexico led to the declaration of independence for Central America on July 3, 1823. Only the colony of Chiapas elected to become a state of Mexico. The rest of Central America (with the exception of Panama, which was still part of Colombia) formed the United Provinces of Central America.

Independent Central America got off to an unstable, turbulent beginning. New political labels were invented to replace the old, but the same issues divided Central Americans. The Conservatives opposed reforms, stubbornly demanding the continuance of royalist institutions. The Liberals, inspired by the Enlightenment philosophers and the Spanish Bourbons, advocated free trade, economic liberalization, republicanism, and clerical reform. They advocated "radical" ideas like public education and the end of forced labor. The new political divisions also had a geographic dimension. The Liberals, largely representing the provinces, advocated a federation of states as had been created in North America. The Conservatives, strongest in Guatemala, wanted a centralized government similar to that of the colonial era. The Liberals gained control of the government and adopted the Constitution of 1824, which abolished slavery and noble titles, limited monopolies, encouraged immigration, and limited tax revenue.

When Conservatives gained power in Guatemala in 1826, a bloody civil war erupted. The Liberals, led by the Honduran Francisco Morazán, won the war in 1829. They quickly imprisoned Conservative leaders and gave state governments broad powers to crush insurrection, and Morazán moved the federal capital to Liberal stronghold San Salvador. In Nicara-

gua the dispute was particularly acute, with the Conservatives of Granada and the Liberals of León in perpetual conflict. Costa Rica, remote throughout the colonial epoch, remained to one side, avoiding the conflict and quietly becoming the first state to export coffee in the 1830s.

The revolt of 1837 was the beginning of the end for the United Provinces. This revolt wasn't just another violent rivalry—it was a peasant uprising throughout the isthmus. The rebellion was chiefly a reaction to the Liberal reforms, modeled after England and the United States. Private acquisition of titles was encouraged as a stimulus to production. A major side effect of this legislation was the swallowing up of new lands by the wealthy few who already possessed substantial holdings. Formerly landed peasants became sharecroppers, and, most important, foreigners snapped up substantial tracts of land, especially in Guatemala. The revolution was particularly hostile to foreign elements.

Popular uprisings against the Liberal reforms stretched from Costa Rica to Quezaltenango during the first half of 1837, but the nucleus of the war surrounded Guatemala's peasant hero, Rafael Carrera. The governor of Guatemala, Mariano Gálvez, failed in his efforts to arrest Carrera. The war began to take on the image of a race war, with Indians, *Ladinos,* and blacks joining to fight the landed white Creoles and foreigners. Guatemala City fell to Carrera's forces on January 31, 1838. A fragile peace soon fell apart, and by March, Carrera had resumed warfare.

Through all this, the federation over which Morazán governed was dissolving. Nicaragua seceded on April 30, 1838, and a month later the Congress in San Salvador followed suit. By the end of the year Honduras and Costa Rica had left the federation. In March 1839, Carrera again entered Guatemala City. For the rest of the year he fought off Liberal resistance, consolidating his grip over Guatemala. Conservatives meanwhile had gained power in Honduras and Nicaragua, and in March 1840 the showdown came. Morazán invaded Guatemala, entering the capital city on March 18. The next day Carrera's Conservative forces routed his army. Morazán escaped to Panama by sea and would reenter Central America only once more. In 1842 he briefly seized power in Costa Rica, only to die before a firing squad in San José.

A new power structure of Conservative *caudillos,* or strongmen, was born in Central America. The Liberals' unsuccessful experiment with federalism had dashed the Conservatives' plans for centralized government in the isthmus. Conservatives now embraced a divisive form of nationalism. Braulio Carrillo in Costa Rica, Francisco Ferrera in Honduras, Francisco Malespín in El Salvador, and Carrera in Guatemala solidified the formation of the new independent nations, thus permanently destroying any dreams of lasting unity. In 1842 all these nations except Costa Rica entered into a defensive pact dedicated to their individual sovereignty, preventing the restoration of the Constitution of 1824. Free trade was encouraged, but they all produced the same commodities and had little to sell one another.

The idealism of the Liberals was abandoned. Carrera and his allies arrived in power as a reaction to the Liberals' efforts to impose economic and social systems that flew in the face of three centuries of Spanish tradition. The Conservatives now supported a strengthened church, a society run by elite landholders and merchants, a deep suspicion of foreigners, and a respect (bordering on romantic glorification) of the region's Spanish

heritage. The Conservatives' emphasis on nationalism and autonomous government, coupled with their paternalistic concern for the rural masses, established attitudes that are the bedrock of modern Central American nationalism.

The Age of Imperialism

International economic pressures played as large a role as internal political dynamics in the development of nineteenth-century Central America. The decline of Spain and the simultaneous rise of the modern industrial powers put Central America under a microscope of world attention not experienced since the treasure flows of the sixteenth century.

Since the days of the conquistadores, a canal had been seen as the key to the economic future of the isthmus. All through the nineteenth century, English, Dutch, French, and North American interests encouraged plans for a canal—usually through Nicaragua. As the leading world trading nation, Britain took the lead.

After 1830 Britain established military garrisons and colonial settlements in the Bay Islands. Central Americans retook the islands almost immediately, lost them again in 1839, and finally reoccupied them in 1841. Britain's economic imperialism continued apace. Belize became the principal port for Central American import and export, and by 1846 all Central American products except coffee entered England duty-free.

Debt also solidified the British influence. Numerous loans from British financial institutions to Central American governments created a morass of debt that is not resolved even today. As an example of the imperialistic nature of these loans, the Carrera government of Guatemala negotiated with the firm of Isaac and Samuel in 1856 to pay off previously encountered debts. Under the terms, the Carrera government pledged 50 percent of its customs receipts to service the debt. Trade, like loans, furthered the British interests. By 1840 nearly 60 percent of Guatemala's imports came from England via Belize, with another 20 percent coming directly from England. By contrast, only 15 percent came from Spain.

The United States had little direct contact with Central America before 1850. The Americans had recognized Central American independence promptly, but did little to discourage British designs in the area. It was not until the end of the Mexican War and the acquisition of California and Oregon that U.S. interests were turned southward. The Bidlack Treaty of 1846 guaranteed U.S. rights of transit across Panama, and a U.S. company used the treaty to construct the Panama railroad between 1850 and 1855.

Anglo-American rivalries were grafted onto domestic Central American frictions as respective commercial and political spheres of interest were carved out. Great Britain tended to ally with Conservative forces, encouraging the division of the territories as a hedge against their dominance in the region, while the Americans ardently supported the Liberal cause of unification.

British gunboat diplomacy once again became commonplace along the Caribbean coast. In 1848 the British seized the settlement at the mouth of the Río San Juan in Nicaragua. The Americans, predictably, protested vigorously. U.S. interests in the region, and in the possibility of a canal, were steadily expanding. The U.S. Pacific territories were separated from

the east coast by thousands of miles of trackless wilderness and hostile Indians, and the Central American isthmus was looked to as the most expeditious east–west route available.

The Clayton-Bulwer Treaty of 1850 called for joint U.S.-British control of any route across the isthmus. It stepped lightly around the questions of colonization and military presence. While it seemed on the surface to guarantee parity of influence, two years later the British declared the Bay Islands a British colony. Honduras protested with U.S. backing, and the British withdrew in 1859. By a treaty with Nicaragua in 1860, the British likewise agreed to abandon the Mosquito Coast. In 1859 the question of sovereignty over Belize was dealt with in a treaty with Guatemala. Guatemala agreed to recognize British sovereignty in return for the construction of a road between the port and Guatemala City. The road was never built, and the issue was never adequately settled. Guatemala reluctantly agreed to Belizean independence in 1981, but a British garrison is still based in the former colony.

Liberal–Conservative conflicts continued in the form of civil wars and open conflicts between the Central American republic. The use of exile forces and international support for internal conflicts became common in the nineteenth century, and this tradition is seen vividly today in Nicaraguan support for revolutionary forces in El Salvador, and Honduran assistance to insurgent Nicaraguan Contras. This ongoing meddling has severely impeded regional unification and has been dramatically compounded by the participation of extra-regional forces—British and American and now Cuban and Soviet influences.

William Walker

The story of William Walker is one of the most bizarre episodes in Latin American history. Not accidentally, every Central American schoolchild knows all about Walker and his adventures, while few North American children even know his name.

The alliance of the Conservatives in Nicaragua with the aggressive British had largely discredited them in the eyes of many Central Americans. For much of the 1840s, Nicaragua effectively had two governments, with Conservatives and Liberals respectively operating out of Granada and León. This simmering civil war had carried on without relief since independence, and Nicaragua was divided and weak. The British had their eye on the territory as the site of a possible canal, and in many ways the country was up for grabs with various players—the Liberals and Conservatives within Nicaragua, Conservatives from Honduras and Costa Rica, the British and the North Americans—all jockeying for position.

North American stakes in the game were raised precipitously by the discovery of gold in California in 1848. This fact, coupled with the absence of convenient transcontinental routes in North America, placed Nicaragua squarely at the center of the principal route for California-bound traffic. In 1849 Cornelius Vanderbilt and his associates established a service in which passengers traveled by boat from New York to San Juan del Norte in Nicaragua, boarded riverboats for travel up the Río San Juan and Lake Nicaragua, and then rode stagecoaches for a brief land journey to the Pacific coast, where they boarded other ships to the San Francisco Bay area. Vanderbilt juggled the books to rob the Nicaraguans of taxes on his sub-

stantial profits, and by 1851 his service needed loans to finance expansions required by the thousands demanding transit to California. Vanderbilt borrowed from British financiers, thus coming into direct conflict with American interests involved in building a railroad across Panama. (Once this railway was completed, Vanderbilt's company went out of business, but by this time Vanderbilt had neatly bought into the Panama route and continued to profit.)

William Walker was the gifted son of a Tennessee frontier family who completed college at age 14 and who by age 23 had obtained a medical degree from the University of Pennsylvania; studied at Paris, Heidelberg, and Edinburgh; and opened a law practice. He drifted into journalism, and became a controversial editor at the *New Orleans Crescent.* When the only woman he would ever love died in a Gulf Coast yellow fever epidemic, he took off for California via Panama. No great wealth or success awaited him there, and he took up the career of the filibuster. At this time of expansion and growth the United States was acquiring new territories in a variety of ways. Some were bought, some conquered, some wrested from Indian nations, and some the object of private initiative. Such was the case when, in 1853, Walker and a group of hastily gathered gold-field losers invaded the northern Mexico department of Sonora, comically declaring the short-lived Republic of Lower California. They were soon routed by Mexican *federales* and surrendered to American border authorities after a devastating march across the scorched desert.

In Nicaragua the Liberals had gained ground in the ongoing conflict, but in 1854 Carrera dispatched aid from Guatemala, which substantially strengthened the Conservative position. The Liberals looked abroad for assistance, offering Byron Cole, an associate of Walker's from San Francisco, huge tracts of land in return for military assistance. Walker gathered his forces in San Francisco and took off south with a motley band of 57 Californians of various nationalities, inadequate weaponry, and a boat that was more an embarrassment than a ship of war. U.S. authorities, flushed with the acquisition of new territories and the Monroe Doctrine, looked the other way.

Walker and his mercenaries landed at Realjo in June 1855. At his first encounter his forces were routed by Conservative troops under Honduran command. Walker successfully retreated to Chinandega, eventually emerging as commanding general of the Liberal forces. In October he took Granada, and the Conservatives agreed to a truce. A coalition government, headed by a Conservative, Patricio Rivas, was established with Walker named chief of the armed forces. Formal recognition came from Washington in May 1856.

Cornelius Garrison, Cornelius Vanderbilt's San Francisco manager, was, meanwhile, conspiring with New York financier Charles Morgan to undercut Vanderbilt's interests in Nicaragua. They sent arms, money, and additional mercenaries to Walker. Veterans of the Mexican War flooded into the territory and the Walker army soon numbered over 2,500 men. Walker, who had been philsophically opposed to slavery, departed from these views as his ranks swelled with American southerners who allegedly wanted to annex Nicaragua as a slave state.

The British had opposed Walker's activities all along, and they fanned Costa Rican, Honduran, and Guatemalan fears of American designs on the isthmus. Liberals throughout Central America supported Walker,

agreeing with him that the region needed democratic values, destruction of the aristocracy, public education, and increased trade. But Liberals were out of power in every territory, and by February 1856 the Conservative governments of Costa Rica, Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala were sending troops to dislodge Walker. On March 1 of that year, Costa Rica declared war and the British provided them arms, munitions, and equipment.

By May, Walker was on the ropes. Guatemalan, Honduran, and Salvadoran troops arrived in Nicaragua to aid the Costa Ricans, and Rivas quit the government. In June 1856 a rather dubious election recognized Walker as president of Nicaragua. He desperately tried to consolidate his power, offering large land grants to Americans who would join him, making English the official language, and legalizing slavery. As Americans with visions of annexing a slave state arrived, support for Walker among Nicaraguans dwindled. Costa Ricans soon had Walker on the defensive and his retreating forces burned Granada, ravaging its architectural beauty. At the end of the year additional reinforcements from the United States were stopped by a British blockade. In April 1857, 2,000 Guatemalans defeated Walker's exhausted and diseased forces. When the Costa Ricans promised surrendering Americans medical attention and passage home, most deserted Walker, leaving him with only 200 troops. Walker surrendered to a U.S. warship sent by President Buchanan.

In New Orleans, Walker received a hero's welcome. He vowed to return to Central America, and in 1860 he did, when British residents in the Bay Islands, furious over British surrender of the islands to Honduras, approached him with the plan of declaring the islands' independence from Honduras. Walker developed plans to join a group of Liberals then rebelling in Tegucigalpa, and in June 1860 he set sail for Roatán. He landed instead at Trujillo, only to be captured by British marines and handed over to the Hondurans. He was promptly executed and is today buried in Trujillo.

The Walker misadventure discredited Liberals throughout the isthmus and consequently extended Conservative power. Also discredited was the United States, which had demonstrated its new imperial role in the region. The Civil War and completion of the Union Pacific Railroad in 1869 diminished U.S. interest in Central America., and the French thought to step into this void and contracted to build a canal through Nicaragua in 1858. Failing in this, they contracted with Colombia in 1878 for a canal through Panama. Ferdinand de Lesseps, builder of the Suez Canal directed the effort, which failed during construction. The emergence of the United States as a naval power focused new interest on the strategic significance of the isthmus, and the U.S. stepped in to finish the canal in 1914, securing Panamian independence from Colombia and carving out a U.S. colony—and a permanent military presence—in the Panama Canal Zone.

The shift of power from Conservatives to Liberals at the end of the century accelerated trends toward modernization and dependence upon coffee and other export commodities. Politically, resurgent Liberalism meant a reaction against the Conservative *caudillos,* but dictatorship continued as the principal method of government. The new Liberals had lost some of the idealism of their predecessors in the days of Morazán, but they did not abandon dreams of progressive government. Rather they had concluded that material economic growth was a priority that needed to preced-

political democracy. Long-term patterns emerged in their obsession for development: anticlericalism, faith in technical education, a rejection of the metaphysical, a "postponement" of democracy, imitation of European and North American values, and an insensitivity to the working classes.

Age of Dictatorship

Between 1870 and 1900 commerce boomed in the region, but capital flight also began as wealthy plantation owners deposited their funds abroad. (This export of wealth is still a critical problem in the region today.) Foreigners played vital roles in the development of the export economies, but a large-scale influx of hardworking immigrants never took place in Central America as it did in North and South America. Rather a small foreign entrepreneurial class created an elite partnership with wealthy Liberals and skimmed their fortunes off the top of the economy.

Politically historians call this period an Age of Dictatorship. The booming export trade required centralized, executive-managed economies, with the military as a guarantor of labor peace and political stability. These so-called Republican dictators from the Liberals' stronghold—Justo Rufino Barrios, Manuel Estrada Cabrera, and Jorge Ubico of Guatemala; Tomás Guardia of Costa Rica; José Santos Zelaya and Anastasio Somoza of Nicaragua; Marco Aurelio Soto, Luis Bográn, Policarpo Bonilla, and Tiburcio Carías Andino of Honduras; and Santiago González and the infamous Maximiliano Hernández Martínez of El Salvador—all created political machinery founded on rigged elections and military might, with an elite of coffee producers and foreigners as their patrons. Only in Costa Rica, where an election transferred power successfully in 1889, did voting rights mean anything at all.

On the face of it these Liberal dictators were similar to their Conservative predecessors, but several changes were evolving: personal cliques of cronies were replaced by permanent administrative bureaucracies; the church lost much of its privileged status; the armies, previously bully gangs faithful only to local *caudillos,* became professional and institutional in nature; and most of the elite families of the Conservative period lost their fortunes. But the new oligarchy would soon become as inbred and aristocratic as their predecessors, and plans for reforms that would spread the wealth evaporated. Public education had always been a rallying issue for Liberals, but the only nation that made any headway during this period was Costa Rica, where literacy rose from 11 percent in 1864 to 76 percent in 1927 and 85 percent in 1963.

Rural peasants and Indians remained where they had always been—at the bottom of society in every category of development. Throughout the region planters ruled entire villages through debt patronage, forced labor, and naked intimidation. Whenever Indians or workers made efforts to organize, they were ruthlessly suppressed by the army. Communal Indian lands were steadily gobbled up, and a landless serfdom was created. The material advances championed by the Liberals—new roads, ports, bridges, expanded agricultural production, and exports—were provided by the backbreaking labor of shamelessly exploited peasants.

The twentieth century found Central America in the same colonial, dependent position from which it had supposedly liberated itself in the previ-

ous century. In the modern era, however, the tune would be called by the United States of America.

The Continuing Struggle

It was the United States participation in the Cuban War of independence, and the subsequent acquisition of Puerto Rico and a string of Pacific island colonies that focused new interest in a Central American canal at the turn of the century. The United States, always with the consent of local authorities, had sent troops to Panama (then a department of Colombia) numerous times in the second half of the nineteenth century to protect the American transisthmus railroad.

In 1902, however, U.S. troops entered in response to disturbances in Colombia and aided Panama in gaining independence. A treaty was signed, granting the United States construction rights for a canal, U.S. control of the 10-mile-wide Canal Zone—and permanent military presence.

The canal exponentially raised the economic and strategic stakes in the Caribbean Basin and Central America. The U.S. rose to the challenge with military interventions in Haiti in 1915, the Dominican Republic in 1916, and, perhaps most significantly, in Nicaragua in 1912. While U.S. fiscal agents seized control of the national treasury, the marines occupied the principal cities, towns, ports, and railroads. The Bryan-Chamorro Treaty of 1916 formalized the client–state status of Nicaragua, and granted the U.S. exclusive rights to the construction of a Nicaraguan Canal, 99-year leases to the Corn Islands off the Caribbean coast, rights to the construction of a navy base in the Gulf of Fonseca, and carte blanche to intervene in Nicaraguan affairs whenever so inclined. As a trade-off, Nicaragua received all of $3 million—to be subtracted from its substantial foreign debt.

The U.S. occupation was essentially low-key. Showing the flag seemed enough to maintain the Conservative governments of Emiliano Chamorro and his succesor Diego Manual Chamorro. The marines were there to protect U.S. economic interests, not to police the turbulent nation. Banditry and political strife continued in the countryside, but stability was sufficient for the marines to withdraw in 1925.

When new revolutionary action broke out in 1926—with support from Mexico—the marines returned. In 1927, State Department official Harry Stimson negotiated a compromise that would maintain Aldofo Díaz in power through 1928, when a U.S.-supervised election would take place. The Stimson agreement also provided for the U.S. creation of a National Guard to police the countryside. In 1928, Liberal army chief José María Moncada won the presidency. However, a military ally of Moncada's, Augusto César Sandino, didn't cooperate, and took to the hills as a guerrilla fighter. U.S. and Nicaraguan forces (led by American officers) pursued Sandino into Nicaragua's northern mountains, but the geography and guerrilla tactics of Sandino's army stymied their efforts. In desperation U.S. forces began aerial bombardment—which did more damage to civilian mountain villages than to Sandino's soldiers—and intimidation of the peasant population sympathetic to the rebels. Sandino was a profound anti-imperialist, and leftists the world over rallied to his cause; however, he resisted their support, publicly rejecting the solidarity of the Commu-

nist International. Sandino, contrary to modern historical revisión from both Havana and Washington, was certainly never a Marxist.

In 1932 an election placed the Liberal Juan Bautista Sacasa in the presidential palace, and in January 1933, U.S. forces left Nicaragua. In February 1934 Bautista Sacasa met with Sandino, ostensibly to discuss reconciliation. After their dinner together, however, Sandino was murdered by National Guardsmen led by Bautista Sacasa's nephew, Anastasio Somoza García, who was the head of the National Guard. Somoza García would not formally assume the presidency until 1936, but from the murder of Sandino onward, the Somozas ruled the Nicaraguan Republic—the strongest family dynasty in Latin American history. In 1950, "Tacho" Somoza pushed a constitution through congress that gave him indefinite dictatorial powers.

The stock market crash of 1929 and the subsequent Depression was disastrous for all the commodity-exporting economies of Central America. The collapse of the region's economies led to an embracing of authoritarian regimes (and, in many cases, flirtations with fascism and communism) throughout the isthmus. In addition to Nicaragua, strong-arm dictators assumed power in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. Even democratic Costa Rica endured strikes and riots.

In El Salvador the military installed Maximiliano Hernández Martínez into the presidency in December 1931. Hernández Martínez crushed the mildly socialist opposition, further polarizing the nation's two incredibly disparate have and have-not classes. El Salvadoran communists decided that the times were right for revolution, and on January 22, 1932, a peasant insurrection was launched in the western coffee-growing region. As an eerie backdrop, that evening volcanoes throughout Guatemala and El Salvador erupted, filling the air with an ashen haze. Rebels marched on the town of Sonsonate, pillaging and terrorizing the various ranches of the countryside. The army garrison in town managed to drive them back, and the revolutionaries—some 5,000 strong—retreated to a nearby town to regroup. Martínez responded with a demonic frenzy of violence. Today it is called simply the *matanza*—the massacre. In villages all over the region, troops marched civilians to mass graves and executed them. A scorched-earth policy was pursued and entire villages were wiped out. Estimates today are that up to 30,000 people were systematically executed by Martínez's army and a hastily assembled civil guard composed of wealthy landowners and their loyal peasants.

Tiburcio Carías Andino was the dictator of Depression-era Honduras. Carías Andino was considerably less ruthless than his fellows in Guatemala and El Salvador, but where Martínez in El Salvador, and Jorge Ubico in Guatemala lasted until 1944, Carías held onto power until 1948.

Guatemala

In Guatemala, General Jorge Ubico became the prototypical tyrant. Freely elected in 1931, Ubico turned suddenly brutal, ordering a wave of assassinations, executions, prison terms, and exile for communists, labor organizers, and any others who seriously questioned his rule. With all opposition silenced, Ubico bore down on the financial front, stabilizing the national economy and granting generous concessions to foreign (usually United States) economic interests. Although the Guatemalan economy ac-

forces, began systematic assassinations of opposition political leaders. Leftist and moderate leftist parties abandoned the electoral process, heading into the mountains to organize armed opposition. The Catholic church, led by Archbishop Oscar Romero, boycotted Romero's inauguration. The People's Revolutionary Army (ERP) began activity in the country's eastern mountains, and open civil war was on.

A revolutionary junta seized power in 1979 with Duarte serving as chief of state. Although moderate middle-class leaders and progressive young officers made up the junta, they could not restrain the accelerating activities of the death squads. In January 1980, Guillermo Ungo and Román Mayorga, the junta's most important progressive civilians, quit the junta and went into exile. Ungo assumed the leadership of the Revolutionary Democratic Front (FDR), a new union of leftist political and military organizations. In March the much-loved Archbishop Romero was murdered while saying mass. In April the Farabundo Martí Front for National Liberation (FMLN), named for the communist leader of the 1932 uprising that led to the *matanza,* unified the country's guerrilla forces. As center-left and centrist politicians began to be targeted by the death squads, they joined the guerrillas in increasing numbers.

Meanwhile, Duarte was virtually a puppet president, held captive by the military and landowners, who frustrated his attempts at gradual change and land reform. In 1982, Duarte was defeated by a right-wing coalition led by Roberto D'Aubisson, a retired army major described by U.S. Ambassador Robert White as a "pathological killer" responsible for the murder of Archbishop Romero. Alvaro Magaña was named provisional president in 1982. Magaña was a moderate but beholden to the reactionary coalition that had secured his election. In many ways Magaña was a compromise lesser-of-two-evils, acceptable to the military and to the powerful U.S. Embassy, which was determined to keep D'Aubisson out of the Presidential Palace.

When Duarte was elected to the presidency in 1984, narrowly defeating Roberto D'Aubisson, El Salvador was in many ways an exhausted nation. The guerrillas had mounted a premature "final offensive" in 1981 and, after failing to inspire an insurrection, settled in for a long, bitter struggle with the military, which continues today.

Nicaragua

Throughout the twentieth century, when nationalistic strikes and socialist-inspired reforms swept over Central American countries, Nicaragua was America's most faithful and docile ally. A special relationship was formed between the government and American business interests, which guaranteed stability, continuity, and profit—at the expense of democracy, social evolution, and welfare. The Somoza family dynasty ruled a Nicaragua that lived out social and economic patterns forged in the previous century. A tiny minority of the population profited from close association with the Somozas, while the majority toiled in the agricultural export industries, owned by the oligarchy, that was the foundation of the economy.

While disenchantment with the Somozas grew, only one party, the Conservatives, stood as an alternative—and they were deeply divided over whether to collaborate with the dictatorship. When an earthquake flattened Managua in 1972 and the Somozas made off with much of the inter-

national aid that poured into the nation, the appalled people of Nicaragua began to think seriously about alternatives to Somocismo.

The Sandinista Front for National Liberation (FSLN) was founded in the 1960s by university students convinced that Marxist-Leninist revolution was the only option for getting rid of the Somoza dynasty. The FSLN was considered the radical left of the Nicaraguan political spectrum until events of the late 1970s forced an alliance of the Sandinistas with other sectors in opposition to the dictatorship. Among these sectors to ally with the Sandinistas were opposition business people frustrated at the graft and avarice of the Somozas, the Catholic church, active in social issues since the declaration of Vatican II, independent unions, political parties, and the independent press, particularly the influential daily *La Prensa*.

In January 1978, *La Prensa* publisher Pedro Juaquín Chamorro was assassinated—many feel on orders from Somoza. The people of Nicaragua rose up in insurrection. Somoza struck back with fury, unleashing his palace army, the National Guard. The United States fretted back and forth, alternately supporting and condemning the dictatorship. Weapons and material support flooded to the Sandinistas from Costa Rica, Venezuela, and Panama. As the war marched through the towns of Nicaragua and as thousands died in the crossfire, the United States sought to ease Somoza out of power through resolutions from the Organization of American States; pointedly leaving out the Sandinistas.

When a national strike—coupled with the flight of capital out of the country—paralyzed the nation in the spring of 1979, the Sandinistas launched a final offensive from Costa Rica. Somoza retreated to his bunker overlooking Managua as his National Guard, in disarray, turned to aerial bombing of the city in an effort to hold back the tide of revolution. International opinion, already behind the Sandinistas, pushed Somoza over the edge when National Guard troops murdered U.S. journalist Bill Steward—on camera, for all the world to see. On July 19, 1979, the Sandinistas marched into Managua, and Somoza's National Guard fled.

Over 40,000 Nicaraguans had died in the vicious civil war, and the national economy was a shambles. The United States set out to assist the shattered nation with generous loans, aid, and the renegotiation of existing debt. But as Cuban advisers and Soviet-supplied weaponry poured into the nation, it became clear that the broad spectrum of dissent that had forced the Somoza regime out was largely powerless—and that true power lay in the national directorate of the FSLN and in the Sandinista Army.

When Ronald Reagan entered office in 1981, the U.S. ceased aid and adopted a decidedly adversarial position. The CIA began meeting with exiled officers of Somoza's National Guard, and the Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN) was created to harass the Sandinistas. The Contras allied with insurgent Mosquito Indians from the Caribbean coast and with exiled Nicaraguans in Costa Rica under the leadership of Eden Pastora—the legendary Commander Zero—who had bravely served with Sandinista Forces during the insurrection, only to find himself edged out of power by hard-line Marxist Sandinistas.

In Nicaragua the Sandinistas embarked on a revolutionary program, much of it modeled on the social and political experiments of the Cuban revolution. The people were quickly mobilized into mass organizations, government-dominated unions, and a militia that by 1984 brought the Sandinistas' total military force to over 100,000. Opposition unions, poli-

cal parties, and the clergy were harassed, and censorship was decreed. Neighborhood Committees for the Defense of the Revolution, modeled on the block spies of Castro's Cuba, kept watch for suspicious behavior among the citizenry.

The Sandinistas' efforts toward positive social transformation included new housing and health facilities for the poor and a celebrated literacy campaign that combined basic reading skills with political propaganda. The Sandinistas created a hybrid economic system of state-controlled industry (largely created from the vast expropriated holdings of the Somozas), cooperative farming, and private enterprise that has thus far seen production dramatically plummet. The United States cut off all economic relations, and the ongoing counterrevolutionary war further bled the economy.

In 1984, Nicaragua's de facto chief of state, Daniel Ortega Saavedra, was elected president in elections marred by censorship, limits on opposition campaign activities, and a state-mobilized organization in favor of the FSLN.

Central America Today

It would be difficult to find a corner of the world in which USSR President Gorbachev's *perestroika* has not had an influence. The crux of the Central American conflict has always been a purely local struggle for social democracy and equality. The concentration of the region's wealth, land, access to education and political power in the hands of a tiny elite and the denial of fundamental human rights to any who questioned this arrangement has always been the heart of the matter. But it was the superpower gamesmanship between the United States and the USSR that raised the stakes and caused the lion's share of the destruction. With Washington and Moscow stepping back from the brink of their own confrontation, there is hope in Central America today that this release of pressure will allow Central Americans to get on with the job of settling their problems by themselves. There is an air of hope in the region—and hope is the one thing that only recently seemed lost.

In Nicaragua, the recent election of newspaper publisher Violeta Chamorro and the willingness of the Sandinistas to honor her mandate has ended the war that claimed some 50,000 lives since 1979. There are two ways of looking at the internationally-supervised election. From the perspective of Chamorro, Nicaraguans were fed up with the ill-conceived socialist program of the Sandinistas. They were tired of rationed food, rampant inflation, and a deteriorating standard of living; they cast out a government that was prying into personal affairs and drafting their teenaged sons to fight an unpopular war against their compatriots.

On the other hand, the case can be made that the election was nothing more than a popularly drafted declaration of surrender. The Sandinistas never got a chance to complete their humanistic policies of literacy, health care, political empowerment and economic democracy, because the United States chose to wage a tragic war rather than allow a Latin American country to stand up and declare its independence from U.S. aggression. There is truth to be found in both points of view. The challenge for Nicaraguans is to continue this debate within the framework of a democratic structure that allows Nicaraguans to reinvent the nation for which so

many have died. Perhaps with Soviet and American arms safely mothballed, the fighting can end and the ideas can begin to flow.

If the ripple of *perestroika* can be felt in Havana and Managua, it can also be felt in El Salvador. While the FMLN managed to stage a spectacular assault on the capital city of San Salvador at the end of 1989, many saw the event as the front's last gasp of armed resistance. Throughout its war against the government of El Salvador, the FMLN has received military and logistic support from the Sandinistas. The leadership of the front operated from offices in Managua, and the guerillas received arms and safe haven from Sandinista Nicaragua. All this of course, has changed. With a hostile government in Managua, and Moscow putting the brakes on arms shipments to the region, the FMLN's days of controlling vast areas of El Salvador seem numbered.

The challenge for the guerillas, then, is to assume a new role as a purely political entity. Whether the FMLN can become a loyal opposition, and whether the government of President Alfredo Christiani can restrain his military, is the central question. This won't be easy. An army full of pathological anti-communist paranoia is not likely to accept former military adversaries in the FMLN as participants in the democratic political process. The outcome in El Salvador may be in large measure determined by Washington. If the guerillas must be reconstituted as a political party, so must the military be reformed so that it may serve the interests of all Salvadorans. U.S. willingness to offer a helping hand to former guerillas will test the Americans' goodwill in the region.

The tragicomic opera of the U.S. invasion of Panama can be summarized with a glance at the next-day headlines. American newspapers told of daring raids against the headquarters of military dictator Manuel Antonio Noriega and of a blow against the heart of the cocaine trade. Mexico city newspapers told of a flagrant violation of international law and of hundreds of civilians killed or rendered homeless by sloppy American bellicosity. They also reminded readers that General Noriega had been in the employ of the Central Intelligence Agency since 1968.

Still, the majority of Panamanians supported the venture. The United States and Panama have an intertwined history and a unique relationship. A large swath of the country, the Canal Zone, remains U.S. property until the year 2000. Thousands of American military personnel and civilians live in Panama full-time. The U.S. dollar is the official currency. Panama, of course, was an invention of the United States which urged the territory to secede from Colombia in order to facilitate the construction of the "American canal". This long shared history created the kind of ironies witnessed during the U.S. invasion. Even as they invaded Panama, many Americans were received by jubilant crowds in the streets waving the flags of both nations, dancing with soldiers and offering celebratory cocktails.

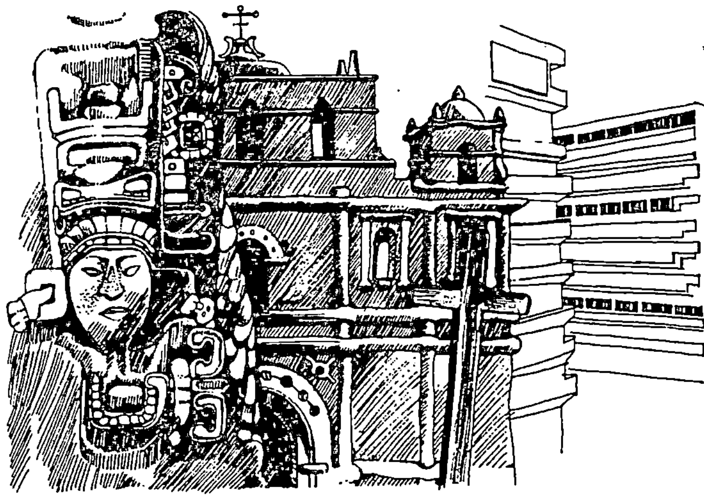
But for many Panamanians it was not Noriega the man that mattered; it was the principle. National sovereignty, territorial integrity and the charters of both the United Nations and the Organization of American States were rudely violated in the invasion. The U.S. scorned the terms of the Carter-Torrijos canal treaties and enough international laws to fill a textbook. The enterprise smacked of gunboat diplomacy and Panama, in the eyes of many Latin Americans, has accepted the role of Banana Republic, living under the shadow of the "colossus of the North". History will judge. For now, Panama is no doubt a better place. U.S. aid and inter-

national investment will again pour into this trading nation with its canal and international banks, and the country will no doubt look back on the enterprise as a rescue. Still, innocent civilians lost their lives by the hundreds, and the United States chalked up yet another in a long list of military interventions into the affairs of its southern neighbors.

Tourism is gaining ground in Guatemala after a decade of decline following horrific violations of human rights committed by its military governments in the early 1980s. The archaeological parks and Indian markets are once again receiving visits from intrepid travelers, and the country remains one of the most stunningly beautiful in Latin America.

But all is not well. The economy has suffered marked decline recently as a result of dropping commodity prices, and the democratically-elected civilian government of Vinicio Cerezo has been unable to restrain the military. In early 1990 the United States took the unusual step of recalling its ambassador to Guatemala following an upsurge of political assassinations attributed to right-wing extremists in the Army.

For 45 years, Guatemala has suffered through a low-level civil war between extremists of the left and right and for the vast majority of this time, the nation was ruled directly by the military. The civilian government did not instigate the mayhem; rather, it appears unable to stop it. According to Americas Watch, in one 14-month period ending in February 1990, five human-rights activists disappeared, political violence claimed the lives of officials of the Christian Democratic and Social Democratic parties, and a Nicaraguan diplomat and a Salvadoran leftist leader were murdered. U.S. citizens, including a nun engaged in human-rights work, have been harassed and arrested by National Police officials. Tourists have not been directly involved, and indeed, one may visit Guatemala without knowing that anything is amiss; but Guatemala today remains a deeply disturbed society.



CENTRAL AMERICA

An Introduction

by
JOHN MITCHEM

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For centuries the tropics have held a unique allure. Something clicks in the mind of Europeans or North Americans—particularly during their respective winters—when the tropics are considered as an ideal vacation spot. The tropics are paradise.

Central America has all the attributes needed to fulfill dreams of equatorial bliss. A languid pace of life; compelling, polychromatic landscapes; hundreds of miles of coast where the sea meets beaches lined with coconut trees, and jungle foliage crashes down nearby mountains. From the rain forests of Costa Rica to the high-mountain volcanic lakes of Guatemala and to the offshore cays and islands strung like jewels from Panama to Belize, Central America has always been a sensory paradise of color and climate.

But new images of Central America have begun to circulate, supplanting the romanticized visions of the past. And these images are every bit

as much a part of Central America as the more traditional views—but they are not nearly as pleasant. They are images of war—of tooth-and-nail conflicts, of divided loyalties and pitched confrontations between philosophies, between families. A new language, too, has emerged to describe these new images. New words and phrases need to be learned to articulate the events of the region: *lucha:* struggle; *fusil:* rifle; *escuadrón de muerte:* death squad. More familiar phrases require less memorization: *imperialismo; communismo; opresión; revolución.* Some terms have become internationally accepted and are seldom translated: *CIA; Sandinista.*

Central America today is a region that can fulfill any vision. If one goes looking for the conflict, one will find it—in the mass political rallies of Managua, in the cold stare of uniformed troops in Guatemala, or among the guerrillas of El Salvador. But if one is looking for a place to lay back and luxuriate in the pleasures of an earthly paradise, Central America can offer this—in the cloud forests of Costa Rica, on Honduras's Bay Islands, the San Blas Islands of Panama, or the offshore cays of Belize.

Central America is a compelling, fascinating part of the world. It is a place where the texture and electricity of history-in-the-making is felt every moment of the day. In many ways, Central America is working through a lot of the same growing pains that Europe and North America experienced only a generation ago. Here, as elsewhere in the world, a certain common-sense caution is in order. But there is no reason to avoid the region, or in any way abandon it.

The Geography of Influence

Central America, from Guatemala to Panama, has a total area of 196,000 square miles, which makes it about one-fourth the size of Mexico, its northern neighbor. But this area is packed with a variety of terrain that rivals the continent of South America. Mountain peaks at over 14,000 feet; areas of jungle in the Darién and the Mosquito Coast have never been surveyed; there are deserts, plains, and vast pine barrens; high-altitude hardwood forests resemble northern Europe more than the tropics.

The narrow isthmus, as narrow in some places as 50 miles, is, in its entirety, smaller than Texas. But the placement of the isthmus has opened the area up to incredible amounts of foreign influence. It has always tended to stand between things: between the gold and silver of Peru and Spain; between the East Coast of the United States and California (during the California Gold Rush, Nicaragua was the preferred transit route for westward migration); between Mexico and South America—and, at least politically, between the United States and the Soviet Union. The Panama Canal is an added factor, raising the strategic stakes in the region and bringing to bear incredible political pressure.

Economically, culturally, and politically, Central America has been washed over by repeated waves of foreign influence. Never isolated like Africa or the jungles of the Amazon Basin, its great ancient cultures were in decline before the European Conquest and were easy prey for the economic and cultural exploitation of Spain. It is today a mélange of various African, Amerindian, and European cultures with, for the most part, only the Spanish language and the Catholic church to give it a sense of unity. And even Spanish is not universal, as thousands of Central Americans prefer to speak the English language or indigenous dialects. And as the coasts

of Central America and its placement on the globe have exposed it to the outside world, its mountains have hindered communication within.

The Barrier Mountains

The overwhelming geographic fact of life in Central America is the continuous, relentless chain of mountains that dominate nearly every republic. The mountains that run the north–south length of the isthmus are volcanic and young. There are over 20 active volcanoes in the region. These pressure points of geothermal energy constantly threaten havoc, but ironically it is the rich ash of volcanic eruptions that have given Central American soil its legendary fertility. Virtually the entire region is an active earthquake zone, and on numerous occasions (as recently as 1972 for Managua, 1976 for Guatemala City, and 1988 for San Salvador), large sections of capital cities have had to be substantially rebuilt.

Over the centuries the mountains have served to divide population groups to the degree that today the cultural landscape of the region is more of a quilt than a melting pot. The terrain of the isthmus, which made roads and communications problematic right into the 1980s, can still be blamed for much of the economic underdevelopment of the region. Trade among the Central American republics has always been difficult, and attempts at regional political integration have failed repeatedly. It was only under President Kennedy's Alliance for Progress that a highway linking the republics of Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama was constructed. Belize is still cut off from the rest of Central America with poor mountain roads across to Guatemala and irregular shipping down the coast to Honduras. Even within nations the mountains and jungles of Central America have kept populations separate to the degree that mountain Indians in Guatemala often speak no Spanish, and the peoples of the Caribbean coasts of Honduras and Nicaragua generally have more relatives in New Orleans or Miami than they do in Tegucigalpa or Managua.

The ocean has always been a more reliable transit route for the Central American economies, and as a result, Europe and the United States have overwhelmingly influenced the isthmus. Intraregional contact remains problematic. An extractive, agricultural economic system has developed in which most economic activity involves the export of commodities and the import of goods and services from outside the region. These foreign economic powers have brought their cultural and political influences with them, and thus, Central America today has profound difficulties with regional unity.

The mountains have also stood as a barrier to social equality and the development of the Central American people. When the riches of the Maya were looted and the gold and silver mines played out, the Spanish conquerors turned to export-oriented agiculture as the primary economic activity of the Central American colonies. To put it bluntly, the indigenous inhabitants of the land were driven to the mountains or barren coasts, where they scratched out whatever subsistence could be had. Even today it is on the coasts and in the highest mountains that one finds concentrations of native inhabitants. The Spanish built their plantations on the best areas of rich soil, and the Indians came down to work these fields as day laborers. Indigo, cacao, and then sugar, cotton, coffee, tobacco, and ba-

nanas were the primary crops. Few of these products are actually designed to feed the people of Central America.

The struggle over land has been at the root of most Central American conflicts in the 500 years since the arrival of the first Europeans, and it remains the principal cause of the struggle today. Early in its history, Central America divided into two distinct classes of people—those who had the land, and those who worked the land on their behalf. The mountains predestined this division from the very earliest days of Central America's history.

The Receding Forests

It is a serious understatement to describe the landscapes of Central America as beautiful. The Caribbean and Pacific coasts, the high mountain cloud forests, even the supernatural desolation of the volcanoes in Central America have a transcendent quality. The popular conception is of jungle, dense with color and the omnipresent roar of insects, reptiles, and multicolored birds.

But despite this fantastic popular view, the hand of man is everywhere apparent. Central America has a dense and rapidly growing population. Beyond the agroindustrial tracts of bananas, cotton, and coffee, most agriculture is of a rudimentary subsistence nature. The principal method of planting is of the slash-and-burn type—the most primitive form of planting on earth. Land is cleared, trees cut down, and the biomass is burned. The soil, often deceptively meager under the canopy of natural growth, rapidly loses its nutrients as minerals are leached away. The patch of land is then abandoned for another. Scrub weeds take over and underfed cattle graze where forests once stood. This type of destruction is complicated by the need to cultivate even extremely steep tracts of land to keep up with the demands of a rapidly growing population. The slash-and-burn technique produces alarming erosion and land destruction from which there is little hope of recovery.

Belize was once a logging colony where fine hardwoods like mahogany were harvested for nearly two centuries. Today virtually the entire expanse of the nation is covered by a meager scrub of gnarled trees and undergrowth. The great stands of mahogany have been turned into furniture for North American and European drawing rooms. In Honduras and El Salvador overcultivation and erosion are complicated by rocketing populations, which further tax the exhausted soil. Water tables are dropping at dangerous rates and international aid agencies finance the digging of ever deeper wells to perform rudimentary irrigation. The rain forests that once characterized the isthmus are, sadly, vanishing. In northern Costa Rica the pressure comes from large-scale cattle ranching, which produces cheap meat for American fast-food chains. In northern Guatemala and southern Mexico simple population pressures are driving subsistence farmers farther and farther into the wilderness in search of new land to slash and burn. The destruction of natural habitats for wildlife in the region are driving many species of animals, notably exotic birds and wildcats, to the brink of extinction.

A political dimension is introduced into the mix when it is remembered that the struggle over land continues to be the essence of the Central American conflict. Since the best lands are occupied by the tiny minority

of the population that controls the national economies, it is politically expedient to encourage peasant occupation of unused wilderness lands. Throughout the isthmus there are unoccupied lands with seemingly great agricultural potential. But, on closer inspection, these rain forests and mountains are ill-suited to commercial development. Their occupation merely hastens the ecological crisis.

Central American People

Central America is an ethnic patchwork—a blend of virtually every racial type known to the New World. A foundation of indigenous population built upon by waves of European, Afro-Caribbean, Middle Eastern, and even Asian immigration has created a modern mixture of races known as the *mestizo.*

The indigenous population of pre-Conquest Central America was in itself a blend of Indians from North and South America. Mezoamerican Indians were the product of highly developed, often urban cultures. The Olmecs, Toltecs, and Aztecs of Mexico and the Maya of Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, and El Salvador are examples of advanced Indian groups living in developed, hierarchical states. Indians migrating northward from South America included the Chibcha of Colombia; the Cuna, Chocó, and Guayamí of Panama; the Huetares, Borucas, and Chorutegas of Costa Rica; the Rama, Suma, and Miskito of Nicaragua. These groups lived in less complex societies based on hunting, primitive agriculture, and fishing. Between these two distinct groups were the Lenca, Jicaque, and Paya of Honduras and El Salvador.

The Spanish that came to settle in Central America soon subdivided into various social strata founded on degrees of racial purity and even place of birth. The Spanish crown dictated that only the *peninsulares* born in Spain could occupy key posts such as governors, judges, and administrators, and these Spaniards came to monopolize wealth and power. The *Creoles,* born in the colonies, were relegated to inferior positions, but eventually had their day when independence destroyed the peninsular aristocracy.

Continuing down the social ladder of colonial Central America were the mestizos, who soon came to represent the majority. The mestizos fell in where the "pure" bloods left off—in small business and small-scale plantation farming. The mestizos, for the most part, spoke Spanish and culturally embraced Europe. The mestizos in turn passed social aggression down the scale to the full-blood Indians, who were held in contempt by all. The Indians served as serfs and slaves, oppressed and put down by every religious, political, and economic institution created by colonialism.

Indians in Central America, even in the present day, have had to make a bitter choice in their lives—to live in Indian communities and withdraw from advancement along the economic scale or to ignore their cultural heritage by assuming the Spanish language and European dress, abandoning traditional lands and moving to urban areas, and even discarding their indigenous names. This choice between isolation and assimilation is increasingly evident in Central America as Indian communities continue to languish at the most basic levels of social and economic poverty.

Africa also lives in Central America—in the thousands of black Central Americans, the vast majority of whom live on the Caribbean coast of the isthmus. Blacks were first brought to the region in the sixteenth century

when indigenous slave populations working the mines and plantations of the colonies needed to be replenished. These older black populations were augmented by groups of blacks from the West Indies brought to the isthmus in later centuries for plantation work or, in the case of Panama, for large-scale engineering projects. Many of these black Central Americans speak English as their primary language.

Blacks in the coastal region have intermingled with indigenous groups to the degree that today many tribal peoples in Nicaragua and Honduras appear Negro in their physical aspect. The Miskito, Suma, and Rama Indians of Nicaragua are examples of this. A smaller subgroup are the Black Caribs of Belize, Honduras, and Nicaragua. The Black Caribs are the product of a racial mix of Africans and Carib Indians on the island of Saint Vincent who were exported en masse by the British and deposited on the coast of Central America in the late eighteenth century.

Various new strains have been added to this mixture. Asians are evident in virtually every Central American city. European-descended Jews are a small but economically dynamic ethnic group, as are the Palestinians sprinkled throughout the region—with a particular concentration in Honduras, where they are active in industrial development. Cubans and Eastern Europeans were, at least through the recent election of newspaper publisher Violeta Chamorro, active in the administration of Nicaragua's Sandinista government. North Americans of various ethnicities are evident in every Central American nation.

Central America's geography is a mirror of its multiracial history. Guatemala today is overwhelmingly indigenous, with the minority of mestizos and whites concentrated in the cities. Belize is primarily black with various blends in the principal cities and Maya communities in the south. The coast of Honduras has a strong Afro-Caribbean influence, with the rest of the country populated by various formulas of *mestizaje*. Costa Rica is the only country in Central America with a largely "pure" European ethnicity. Panama has the color and feel of the Caribbean or Brazil—a kaleidoscopic blend of numerous races and colors.

NICARAGUA: THE ECONOMY

The Nicaraguan economy has deteriorated sharply in the last few years; per capita income is estimated by the World Bank to be $300-350 per year. Years of macro-economic mismanagement by the Sandinistas have left the nation without the capacity to maintain its rapidly deteriorating infrastructure. Nicaragua is currently among the world's most economically disadvantaged countries, with little prospect for growth without significant debt relief and new assistance. 1990 closed with more than a 4 percent decline in output and about 13,500 percent inflation.

- Nonetheless, there was progress toward economic reform during 1990:

  -- Tax revenues increased sharply as a result of the indexation of taxes and the elimination of certain exonerations, the maximum tariff rate was lowered from 60 to 20 percent, a presidential decree eliminated the government export monopoly, and the exchange rate was unified.

- With the March 3 introduction of its stabilization plan, the GON has taken the most essential and politically difficult first step in putting its economic and financial house in order. The plan includes:

  -- Devaluation of the cordoba oro from 1:1 to 5:1 per U.S. dollar,
  -- Real reduction of public sector salaries,
  -- Commitment to end inflationary Central Bank financing of the fiscal deficit and the banking system,
  -- Establishment of realistic utility prices
  -- Withdrawal of the devalued old cordoba by the end of April.

- While strikes have broken out in protest of the plan, they are not as violent as the protests that paralyzed the nation last summer.

- The government has settled strikes in the health and education sectors; while these settlements call for wage increases in excess of those under the stabilization plan, observers believe that the government has the resources to absorb these wage costs without significantly deviating from the stabilization plan. The strongest challenge to the plan will come in 10 weeks, when the GON must fulfill its promise to restore the purchasing power of its lowest paid workers.

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...ears of Travel Experience ★★★★

Fodor's

5th Edition

Central America

Including Guatemala, Belize, Costa Rica, Honduras, Panama

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ISBN 0-679-01893-X

Fodor's Central America

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Cover Design: Vignelli Associates

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FACTS AT YOUR FINGERTIPS

by
A. R. WILLIAMS

TO GO OR NOT TO GO. If you're thinking about traveling to Central America these days, you also may be secretly wondering whether it's all that good an idea. But how dangerous will it really be? And how crazy do you have to be to do it? Not as much as you might think, on either count. You'll just need a healthy sense of adventure in some places, a good dose of patience everywhere, and a practical no-nonsense streak to keep you out of trouble.

Nicaragua and El Salvador are not vacation destinations yet. Both countries are experiencing a decrease in military action as this goes to press, but their political situations have historically been so volatile that we can't advise travelers to visit these countries safely. We have, therefore, excluded individual chapters on Nicaragua and El Salvador from this edition of *Fodor's Central America.* Both countries also are experiencing such drastic shortages in even the most basic supplies—food, potable water, gasoline—that the traveler would have to be prepared for tremendous hardships. Granted, some dedicated surfers will risk their lives to battle the waves off El Salvador, and devoted religious and peacemaking groups do sponsor trips to Nicaragua, but these are highly specialized journeys with specific destinations in mind. For now, we would counsel the casual traveler to wait a while longer before visiting these two beautiful, yet beleaguered, countries. It is hoped that conditions in Nicaragua and El Salvador will improve over the next year so that chapters on the two countries will be included in the next edition of this guide.

Common sense dictates that it would be foolish to plan a jaunt through Nicaragua or El Salvador at this point in time. Americans, in particular, are far from popular with military and guerilla types in these regions, except as kidnap victims, or worse. Border crossings can be hair-raising.

With this in mind, we have concentrated on the Central American countries that are encouraging tourism and welcoming visitors in record numbers. Belize and Costa Rica are experiencing an unprecedented boom in tourism, for good reason. Both countries abound in natural and cultural wonders. Honduras and Panama are a bit more difficult, because of shaky military situations. Though relations between the U.S. and Panama are improving, the borders are still somewhat dangerous, and it's best to stick with well-traveled routes. The Bay Islands of Honduras are a popular paradise for scuba divers, but the interior is another story, involving risky military situations. Guatemala is so gorgeous and so rich in ancient cultures that travelers continue to visit, despite the country's well-deserved reputation for violence. Follow all the rules here, and behave with utmost courtesy and respect.

Aficionados of Central America will tell you that the trip is more than worth the effort, and many return year after year to their favorite spot.

One woman, for instance, has been back and forth so many times on vacations that the visa section of her passport is a solid block of immigration stamps, and the silver eagle has been worn off the front cover after many heavy handlings at border crossings. Among other attractions, the world's second-longest barrier reef—after the Great Barrier Reef of Australia—brings skin divers to the offshore islands of Belize and Honduras. Ruins of Mayan settlements such as Tikal in Guatemala and Copán in Honduras are rated as spectacular even by veteran Mesoamerican pyramid climbers. Textile collectors bargain for brilliantly colored weavings with Guatemalan Indians (called *indígenas* there, never *indios*) speaking softly sibilant native languages, or for intricate reverse appliqué *molas* from Panama's Cuna Indians. The trains that link Costa Rica's capital of San José to the coastal city of Puerto Limón, and the Panama Railroad that links Panama City on the Pacific with Colón on the Atlantic, are classic railroad adventures, The Panama Canal, that country's number one tourist attraction, is still a wonder of engineering. Bird-watchers add to their life lists in Belize's jungles and Costa Rica's extensive national parks. High rollers revel in Panama City's sizzling nightlife.

Sure, there are risks in some of this. Hardly a day goes by when Central America doesn't appear in the news, and reports usually are not cheery. You've got to expect that traveling through countries involved in seething political confrontations will pose some dangers, but then if you wanted complete security, you'd still be reading *National Geographic* in front of the fireplace. Actually risk to life and limb through armed conflict is not great. Certainly there are dangerous places, but, in general, host governments are not about to let tourists anywhere near potential or real hot spots, and you're unlikely to get into serious trouble unless you insist on being where you're not supposed to be and doing what is forbidden.

The present unrest is more likely to have an impact on your trip in the form of inconveniences—increased border security, military checkpoints along highways, disrupted public transport, and so forth. How inconvenient things get depends greatly on what country or countries you'll be traveling in—places with grave political problems don't have much time or patience for the niceties of the tourist trade, of course. Predicting what areas those will be by the time you read this book is impossible. Things are changing so quickly in Central America these days that even people who travel around the region frequently on business are finding it difficult to keep current. We have tried in this section, though, to provide you with basic information on how to plan and prepare for your trip and how to maneuver yourself through what you find once you get there. But in a region where rules, regulations, and the specifics of a given situation are liable to shift suddenly, nothing can or should be taken for granted. It is recommended that you check with your State Department for current travel advisories before departure. Once you arrive, keep your wits about you, and if something looks dangerous or different from what you expected, ask about it. Things may have changed just yesterday.

TRAVEL AGENTS. The chances of finding a travel agent who counts Central America among his or her specialties is slim. Nevertheless, a good one can be a tremendous boon to your trip, saving you time and money by guiding you through the complex maze of foreign travel. Agents can arrange transportation, accommodations, auto rentals, tours, and package

deals. They can advise you on how to obtain a passport and can get necessary visas for you (usually for a separate fee). They have information about U.S. Department of State travel advisories and what sort of inoculations you are likely to need. As a middleman, the agent may also be able to sell you different kinds of insurance offered by a variety of specialty companies.

Insurance is a good thing to consider when planning a trip to Central America, for obvious reasons. Baggage insurance against loss or damage depends on the length of your trip and the coverage you want—a 30-day $1,000 policy may run you about $50. (Check first to see if your homeowner's personal property policy already covers some of your belongings.) Health insurance also depends on the length of your stay, with fees and options varying widely. (Again, check current coverage. What you already have may be sufficient.) Comprehensive packages are also available, and may include coverage for trip cancellation or interruption, baggage problems, accidental death, medical expenses, personal liability, or emergency evacuation.

You might consider planning your trip through a vast agency like *American Express* or *Thomas Cook* or through a smaller one with an affiliate in the country or countries where you will be traveling. You will be their client, and they can take care of you all along the way. Bear in mind, though, that travel agents are much more likely to be able to help someone who wants to fly in and out of Central America, stay at upscale hotels, and see the sights from a rental car or a guided tour. They may not know much about local transport, land border crossings, or charming, cheap (but clean and comfortable) *pensiones* in converted colonial houses. The more unusual your plans and off the beaten track your itinerary, the more you're on your own.

If you don't know of a good travel agent, consult the Yellow Pages for a travel agency that displays the *American Society of Travel Agents* (ASTA) logo, or contact ASTA directly (Box 23992, Washington, DC 20026–3992, tel. 703–739–2781); they can provide listings of their members in your area. See if the initials CTC appear after your agent's name, too. These stand for Certified Travel Counselor and indicate that the person has had at least five years' experience and has completed a two-year graduate-level program on the travel industry. Travel-related disputes should be sent in writing to the Consumer Affairs Dept. at the above address. *ASTA Canada* can be contacted through Cabie House of Travel Ltd., 511 W. 14th Ave., Suite 101, Vancouver, BC V5Z 1P5; the *Association of British Travel Agents* (ABTA) can be contacted at 55–57 Newman St., London W1P 4AH (tel. 01–637–2444).

OFFICIAL PAPERS AND PAMPHLETS. You will need some sort of documentation to enter all Central American countries. A few require a passport stamped with a visa granted for a specific purpose and period of time. Embassies and consular offices of the countries you plan to visit issue visas, and you can arrange to obtain the ones you need at home, or one or two countries ahead on the road (at the Guatemalan Embassy in Mexico City, for instance, if you're traveling down that way). There is sometimes a fee for obtaining a visa (it can run to $10 or so), you may need one or more photographs, and the process is a slow one, so start well

in advance. If you're negotiating this through the mail, be sure to send your passport registered and insist that it be sent back the same way.

It is wise to obtain all visas you think you will need before you leave home. Foreign consular offices abroad may have hours that are very inconvenient for your traveling schedule, and the offices may be difficult to find in a strange city. Failing this, on the road you should try to keep at least one visa, if not two, ahead of your travels. It's also a good idea to take a half dozen passport-style photographs in case additional documentation is required for anything from a fishing license to a tourist-card extension.

Other countries in the region let tourists from certain countries visit with a tourist card and proof of citizenship (birth certificate or naturalization papers, for instance; other documents may be accepted, but that varies from country to country, and it's best to check that out with an embassy or consulate). Some tourist cards are issued free, some cost money, most last for just a few months. Many travelers to Central America pick them up in the airport at the counters of airlines serving the region, but embassies and consulates issue them as well, and they can usually be obtained at land border crossings.

The U.S. Department of State publishes a pamphlet entitled *Visa Requirements for Foreign Governments,* which can be obtained for 50¢ by writing to Foreign Visa Requirements, Consumer Information Center, Pueblo, CO 81009. The Department of State's Bureau of Consular Affairs maintains an information line for visitors who wish to check on any official travel advisories for the region at 202–647–5225. In addition, the bureau provides information on customs, currency regulations, health concerns, local laws, and social customs. Various other brochures available for $1 each include "Your Trip Abroad", "A Safe Trip Abroad", "Tips for Americans Residing Abroad", "Tips for Senior Citizens", "Tips for Travelers to Central and South America". Request by title from Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC 20402, or call 202–783–3238 and charge on your MasterCard or Visa. No COD orders accepted. Central America is in such a state of flux these days, though, that details may quickly become out of date. You had best double-check what you'll need by contacting embassies or consulates directly. You can then inquire about other requirements as well. Some countries require an ongoing or return airline or bus ticket, and some ask visitors to show money to prove they can support themselves. The amount often depends on the particular traveler, the immigration officials, and the length of stay. Most countries charge an entrance and/or exit fee, but payment configurations may be unusual. Belize, for example, charges a departure tax. In Guatemala, visas are free, but tourist cards must be purchased for $1 and departing visitors pay an $8 fee. Also, if you arrive at land borders at off hours, you may be asked to pay extra. If you're planning on doing anything out of the ordinary, ask about it. (Example: if one parent is traveling with a minor child in Guatemala, he/she needs a written authorization from the other parent, notarized and in triplicate.) Embassies and consulates sometimes can provide you with general tourist information as well, or they will refer you to national tourist offices that can.

Although a number of Central American countries do not require that U.S. citizens have a passport, it is a good idea to carry one anyway. It is *the* internationally accepted form of personal identification and is recognized everywhere—at airport immigration, at land border crossings, at

military checkpoints on the roads, at banks when you want to cash traveler's checks. (A birth certificate is much less recognized and will be unintelligible to a non-English speaker anyway.) Make sure you fill in on page 4 of the passport the name, address, and phone number of next of kin or a close friend. If you lose your passport, or if it is stolen, notify the nearest U.S. consular office or passport agency immediately.

If you are planning to travel among several Central American countries, a passport bearing multiple-entry visas may be more convenient than tourist cards. Several embassies and consulates in the U.S. can assist you with visas. Send your passport by registered mail, and enclose a self-addressed envelope and the paperwork to have it returned by registered mail. Allow two weeks for handling. The waiting period may be decreased if you deliver your passport in person. Small border crossings in particular may present difficulties if you're traveling on a tourist card. At the crossing closest to the Mayan ruins of Copán, for instance, Guatemalan officials may refuse to allow travelers with tourist cards to cross the border out of Guatemala and visit the site—even if Honduran officials directly across the way give the go-ahead. Conversely, if you're coming from Honduras into Guatemala, the Guatemalan officials at that same crossing do not issue tourist cards, and you won't be able to enter Guatemala there without a visa in a passport. Farther north, Guatemala doesn't recognize Belize as a country, so border crossings between the countries may be dicey without a passport and visa. In addition to border problems, getting extensions on tourist cards can be difficult, requiring a lot of time and red tape.

TOURIST INFORMATION. The publications these offices send you will give a fair idea of how competitive the tourist industry is in each country. On the high end of the scale is **Costa Rica,** with *National Tourist Bureaus* in Miami (200 S.E. 1 St., Suite 402, Miami, FL 33131; 305–358–2150). People answering the phones know their country and the tourism business well, and they send out a splendid package of country and city maps and brochures on almost every tourist experience you might want to have in Costa Rica. The *Guatemala Tourist Commission* may be contacted at Box 144351, Coral Gables, FL 33114–4351, 305–854–1544. For information on Honduras, send an SASE to *Honduras Information Service,* Box 673, Murray Hill Station, New York, NY 10156, 212–490–0766. Not a government agency, the information service provides information packets for $5 which include tourist highlights, hotels, tours, and maps. They can also give you information on Guatemala. The *Belize Tourist Information Board* has a toll-free information number (800–624–0686) for referrals to companies that specialize in tours of Belize.

The cultural attachés at the following embassies may be useful when you're making travel plans:

Belize: 3400 International Dr. NW, Suite 2-J, Washington, DC 20008, 202–363–4505.

Guatemala: 2220 R St. NW, Washington, DC 20008, 202–745–4952.

TOURS. Your travel agent should be able to get you information on tours to Central America that match your means and interests. The variety of what's available within the region is considerable, though tours are concentrated in countries that are most popular (and considered safest). Archeological tours abound, of course, since Central America was the home

of the Maya empire and ruins lay scattered across the northern part of the region. *(The Complete Visitor's Guide to Mesoamerican Ruins,* written by Joyce Kelly and published by the University of Oklahoma Press, is a good site-by-site primer complete with maps and photographs.) *Far Horizons Cultural Discovery Trips* (Box 1529, 16 Fern Lane, San Anselmo, CA 94960; 415–457–4575), for instance, offers a 10-day tour of the Mayan ruins in Belize, with an optional four-day extension to visit Tikal in Guatemala. *Holbrook Travel* (3540 N.W. 13 St., Gainesville, FL 32609; 904–377–7111), has tours of Belize and nature tours of Costa Rica, among others. The more adventurous might want to try the Costa Rican white-water rafting, volcano climbing, and nature hiking tours put together by *Wilderness Travel* (801 Allston Way, Berkeley, CA 94710; 415–548–0420 or 800–247–6700) and *SOBEK Expeditions* (Box 1089, Angels Camp, CA 95222; 209–736–4524 or 800–777–7939). *Costa Rica Expeditions* (Apartado 6941, San José, Costa Rica) has white water rafting tours and a fishing lodge on the Caribbean in Costa Rica; *Great Trips* (1616 W. 139th St., Burnsville, MN 55337; 800–552–3419) specializes in tours of Belize; *Ocean Connection* (16728 El Camino Real, Houston TX 77062; 713–486–6993 or 800–331–2458) has scuba trips to Belize, Honduras, and Costa Rica; *Safaricentre* (3201 Sepulveda Blvd., Manhattan Beach, CA 90266; 213–546–4411) has custom tours to Belize, Guatemala, and Costa Rica; *International Expeditions* (1776 Independence Court, Suite 104, Birmingham, AL 35216 or 800–633–4734) has tours of Belize and Costa Rica; the *Clipper Cruise Line* (7711 Bonhomme Ave., St. Louis, MO 63105; 314–727–2929 or 800–325–0100) has 14-day tours in Apr. and Nov. aboard its *Yorktown Clipper* to Costa Rica's National Parks and Panama's San Blas Islands as well as to the Panama Canal; and *Wildland Journeys* (3516 N.E. 155th St., Seattle, WA 98155; 206–365–0686 or 800–345–4453) has several tours, including camping, family, and jungle safaris to Belize and Costa Rica.

If can't make up your mind about what you want to see before you go, you can always arrange to take a local tour. Travel agencies in every capital city will be delighted to help you put together a travel itinerary for their country—and they're likely to know more than your agent at home, since they're on their own turf.

STAYING HEALTHY. Before you set off on your trip, make sure immunizations for measles, mumps, rubella, polio, diphtheria, tetanus, and pertussis are up-to-date. You might also consider a typhoid vaccination and a gamma globulin shot against hepatitis as well as a yellow fever vaccination (for travelers planning to be off the beaten track in infected areas). None of these is required except the yellow fever vaccinations, and that only for Panama's provinces of Bocas del Toro and Darién. Nevertheless, it is a good idea to keep an official record of your vaccinations. The booklet *International Certificates of Vaccination* (#PHS-731), is an internationally recognized form that serves this purpose and can be obtained for $2 from the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC 20402; telephone 202–783–3238. Keep the booklet with your passport. If you are subject to severe allergic reactions or have some other unusual health problem, you should wear a medical-alert bracelet and carry an appropriate warning card along with your passport as well.

If you take prescription medicines, keep them in their original bottles and carry a copy of your doctor's prescriptions to make passage through

customs easier. (Panama is particularly strict about this because of widespread drug trade in neighboring Colombia.) Take whatever you need in the way of medical supplies. In many Latin American countries you can obtain medicines over the counter just by knowing what to ask the pharmacist for, but shortages are not unknown. If you do purchase medicine from a local pharmacy, make sure that it has been refrigerated, if needed, and that the expiration date hasn't passed.

When you're packing, put in an extra pair of eyeglasses and contact lenses and enough contact lens fluid to see you through the trip, as well as a copy of the prescription for your glasses or lenses. Travelers planning to spend time in coastal areas should include a pair of sunglasses and an appropriate sunscreen. (Bear in mind that the sun is strong in the tropics. You can get a burn before you realize it, so take it slow. Reflection off the water or off a light-colored building will fry you doubly quick.) Women should take along feminine hygiene products. Tampons, in particular, tend to be scarce, expensive, and of dubious quality. The same goes for birth control devices. You might also make up a small first-aid kit of basics: Band Aids, antiseptic cream, aspirin or stronger pain killer, diarrhea medicine, decongestant–antihistamine, motion sickness pills, lip balm with a sunscreen, topical sunburn remedy, hand and body lotion against chapping, throat lozenges, dental floss, antifungal foot powder (for the steamy coastal areas), insect repellent, Calamine lotion or other remedy to soothe the itch of insect bites and sunburn, and anything else your doctor suggests.

Before you leave, make sure you treat, or have treated, even the smallest injury. Cuts and stings fester quickly in the tropics.

Medical insurance is a must. Double-check that you are covered, and if not, take out a policy.

Once you're off on your travels, it's the food and water that are most likely to do you in. Until your body gets used to local bacteria, it's best to think before you put anything into your mouth. And if hands are involved (in eating, dental flossing, etc.), scrub them first. They can easily transmit street bugs into your digestive tract.

In general water systems in the larger Central American cities are fairly safe, unless the city has undergone tremendous growth without expanding and improving water treatment and sewage facilities. Water in smaller towns and villages is less dependable, though in Costa Rica it is safe to drink the tap water throughout the country. It is best to use bottled water for the first few weeks, or for your entire trip if you're not staying long. Hotels where tourists stay are usually quite honest about the quality of their water and will gladly bring you bottled (*aqua de botella)* or purified water (*aqua purificada)* if you ask. Some hotel rooms are automatically stocked with it. If you generally feel nervous about drinking water in foreign countries or plan to be out backpacking where you know the water will be consistently bad, you can stock up on Sterotabs or Halazone tablets before you leave home. When dissolved in the water, they will purify it after about a half hour. If you have the proper equipment, you can always boil water for about 15 minutes. Remember that ice cubes are simply frozen water and might be contaminated. Make sure that plates and glasses on which you are served are completely dry. Residual water on a recently washed plate may be bad as well.

Unless you are on a long trip and your body can adjust slowly to the local food, it's best to avoid eating on the street or in markets. Even after adjusting, it's a risky proposition. Carelessly washed glasses in market restaurant sections have been known to pass on the cold-sore type of herpes virus, among other things. You should also avoid salads, fresh fruits or vegetables that you haven't peeled yourself, milk or custard products of suspicious appearance or origin, and mayonnaise and creamed foods (which spoil quickly in the tropics). Meat, poultry, seafood, and vegetables should be cooked thoroughly and served hot. Pork is best avoided entirely. Bottled soft drinks, beer, wine, and hot coffee and tea are safe beverages.

Despite the best precautions, you may come down with a case of diarrhea. Some travelers prefer to let nature take its course for a few days. Others swear by over-the-counter medication such as Pepto-Bismol tablets; one theory advises you to drink Pepto-Bismol before every meal to coat your stomach and prevent germs from settling in. Still others prefer to plug everything up right away with a prescription remedy like Pramidisa or over-the-counter Immodium or Lomotil (though this can be toxic if the indicated dosage is exceeded). If you've traveled a lot, you know what works for you. If not, you should ask your doctor for suggestions before you leave home. If you are stricken, stick to a bland diet of foods like rice, mashed potatoes, bananas, papayas, and lots of liquids. Latin American mothers set great store by chamomile tea (*tée de manzanilla,* or just *manzanilla)* as a treatment for upset stomachs.

If the diarrhea persists or if it is accompanied by fever, cramps, and blood in the stool, you may have dysentery. Don't try to treat it yourself. See a doctor, who will will figure out which sort it is and prescribe proper medication to clear up the problem. Central American doctors may be better at treating tropical gastrointestinal maladies than their colleagues in the United States, since they see patients with such complaints all the time. U.S. embassies often have lists of local English-speaking doctors.

Malaria is a serious health problem around the world, especially since the disease itself is becoming resistant to medicines and mosquitoes are increasingly resistant to insecticides. Virtually every Central American country has infected areas, particularly in low-lying coastal regions. If you know you will be traveling where malaria is a risk, ask your doctor at home to prescribe the appropriate antimalarial medicine before you leave. (Chloroquine is still good for most of Central America, but malaria strains in Panama are becoming Chloroquine-resistant, so Fansidar may be prescribed for that country.) The medicine should be taken before, during, and after your trip, either daily or weekly. It is not prophylactic, but simply suppresses the symptoms. Once you've contracted the disease, you're stuck with it, and bouts of fever and chills may reoccur for years. Prevention, of course, is best.

Malaria mosquitoes feed between dusk and dawn, and they don't have the high-pitched whine that alerts you to swat them. You can protect yourself after sunset by avoiding perfume or aftershave, covering as much of your body as possible with clothing (preferably light-colored), applying insect repellent to exposed skin, and sleeping under a mosquito net unless your hotel is air-conditioned and the windows are sealed.

If you develop a high fever and extreme exhaustion once you have returned home, you may have contracted malaria. See your doctor immediately and tell him/her where you have been and when.

Travelers should be aware that the incidence of dengue, a viral disease transmitted by mosquitos, has increased in Central America over the last few years. Although visitors are considered at low risk for severe dengue infection, extra precautions against mosquito bites are advised.

Backpackers, bird-watchers, and other travelers who expect to be in the boonies should be aware of Chagas' disease. It is caused by parasites borne by the barbar bug, or *vinchuca.* This nocturnal critter hitchhikes on opossums, armadillos, and various rodents of the countryside, and usually bites humans on the face as they sleep. The resulting disease is inevitably fatal. The nooks and crannies of native huts are favorite hiding places of the *vinchuca,* so if you're planning to accept local hospitality, bring a hammock (or buy one—they're one of Central America's best handicrafts) and string it up outside. Though not all that common, cases of Chagas' disease occur in all countries covered in this book except Belize.

Rabies is a much bigger health problem in Latin American countries than it is in the United States. Loose dogs on the street obviously should be avoided, but be careful of domestic animals that are behaving peculiarly as well. If you are bitten, the offending animal should be kept under observation for signs of the disease. Treatment for humans, begun within three days of the bite, is a series of injections given over a two-week stretch.

If you want to read up on any of the above diseases and health problems before you set out, the *Health Guide for Travellers to Warm Climates,* published by the Canadian Public Health Association, 1335 Carling Ave., Suite 210, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, K1Z 8N8, is highly recommended by many tropical travelers. *Health Information for International Travel* is comprehensive and updated yearly, though slanted toward health-care professionals. Your doctor should be able to get it for you free from the Centers for Disease Control, Center for Prevention Services, Division of Quarantine, Atlanta, GA 30333 (tel. 404–639–3534); or it can be purchased for $5 from the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC 20402. The International Association for Medical Assistance to Travellers (IAMAT for short) publishes a wide variety of pamphlets with health information, including one on Chagas' disease, a *World Malaria Risk Chart,* a *World Immunization Chart,* one on *How to Adjust to the Heat,* and another on *How to Avoid Traveller's Diarrhea.* Its *World Climate Charts* contain information on appropriate clothing and the sanitary conditions of water, milk, and food. And it puts out a list of IAMAT affiliates around the world that will find you an English-speaking doctor (a specialist, if you need one) who has agreed to provide services for a set fee ($20 for an office visit, $30 for a house or hotel call, and $35 for Sundays, holidays, and nights). To obtain any of the IAMAT's publications, write to 736 Center St., Lewiston, NY 14092, or tel. 716–754–4883.

CLIMATE. The clothing you decide to take with you will depend on where you will be traveling in Central America and what time of year it is. Climate generally depends on altitude. Coastal areas tend to be hot and humid, and low-lying Panama in the south can be quite a steam bath. Cities of the highlands and central plateaus are mild all year round. Some, like Tegucigalpa in Honduras and San José in Costa Rica, are known as cities of eternal spring. There, the middle part of the day is usually warm and sunny—sometimes even hot—but evenings are chilly enough for a

jacket or a sweater. Towns at higher altitudes are cooler during the day and can be downright nippy at night. Climate variations, though, are nowhere near as drastic as the change from winter snow to summer heat up north. Central America is a temperate region, and the clothing you pack can be reasonably homogeneous, even if you plan to spend some time in the mountains and some time on the coast.

The region's rain cycle will be the overriding climate factor that will shape your trip. The rainy season runs from about April or May to October. It moves north, so while Panama's Darién province may be dripping in April, northern countries may still be waiting for the first rains in May. Rain falls part of almost every day, with brief afternoon showers during the first part of the season giving way to downpours (often still in the afternoon) later on, and finally rain and more rain well into the season. It turns the land to an emerald green bursting with flowers. It also brings a steamy 100 percent humidity to the coasts, makes unpaved roads virtually impassable, and breeds mosquitoes—not big problems if you're sticking to large cities.

During the dry season, from November to April or May, rainfall is unusual except along the coasts. The land is generally parched and brown, the air may be dusty and unpleasant to breathe at times.

Many people try to plan their trips to Central America during the transition periods, which are the most pleasant parts of the year. In June and July the rains have just started, the dust has settled, and the countryside has begun to bloom again. And in October and November the land is still lush and the air still fresh, although the rain has slackened off. Travelers have to break out the umbrella for rain in either case, but showers are bracketed by clear weather, and nothing gets too wet or too dry.

WHAT CLOTHING TO PACK. U.S. spring-weight clothing is a good basis for a Central American wardrobe. It is appropriate for the central plateaus, and you can add layers if you're going up into the highlands or subtract layers if you'll be on the coasts.

Although wash-and-wear fabrics are convenient, natural fibers are apt to be more comfortable—and healthy—in either cold or heat. Cotton is a good fiber for the tropics. It is marvelously absorbent and allows perspiration to evaporate as well as air to circulate. Synthetics can be hot and sticky on the coasts, cold and clammy in the mountains. This is true all the way down the line, from shirts to underwear to socks. Don't worry about keeping the cotton pristine. Labor is relatively cheap in Central America, and you can get clothes washed and ironed for very little money. Dry cleaning is quite another matter. Quality in this part of the world is *very* uneven.

If you're going to be on the coasts a lot, lighter colors will be cooler, since they reflect rather than absorb light. Bring a straw or cotton sun hat if you plan to be outdoors a lot as well as at least one long-sleeved shirt and a pair of trousers to fend off the sun in case you get burnt. Remember your bathing suit, too.

You might pack a water-repellent raincoat (waterproof won't let the air circulate), which will keep the rain off in general and over a woolen sweater will keep you warm in the highlands. Bring a fold-up umbrella as well.

Shoes are important, especially if you will be walking a lot. Make sure they're comfortable and sturdy, and take a couple of pairs. Tuck in sandals for warm days. You certainly don't want to overpack, but don't count on being able to purchase satisfying replacements for shoes—or any other item of clothing—that you have forgotten. For one thing, quality may not be up to U.S. standards. But more important, you may be much larger and proportioned quite differently than local customers, so finding something that fits in a useful fashion may be difficult. Tailors are still pretty cheap compared with those in the U.S., and they do beautiful work, but having something custom-made is practical only if you're staying put for a while. Good tailors often have quite a backlog of orders to fill, and you'll have to go back for fittings if you've asked for something complicated like a suit.

It is quite all right for women to wear trousers in Central America, but shorts on either sex are definitely out of place anywhere outside coastal resorts and archeological sites. (And they're not such a great idea when you're pyramid climbing. If you have to sit down to get down steep, shallow stairs, you're liable to get your legs scraped.) Women should be particularly careful not to draw attention to themselves with their clothing. Wearing sarongs, strapless sundresses, or tube tops outside of a resort setting is frowned upon. Always wear a bra, whether you need it or not, unless you deliberately mean to provoke. *Under no circumstances* should anyone of either sex wear army khaki or camouflage jungle attire or carry or use anything that smacks of the military. You're setting yourself up as a target if you do.

Central America has gotten used to the disheveled backpacker style by now, but in general you'll have a much better traveling experience if you're clean and tidy. Latin Americans are very appearance-conscious, and people there take great pains with personal grooming and attire. The logic behind someone having enough money for international travel, yet looking like a waif in patched jeans, escapes them. Border guards and other officials may be particularly unsympathetic. If you look especially scruffy, penniless, and powerless and act at all disoriented, you run the risk of having drugs planted on you, and perhaps being denied entry into a country. It's also likely that you will be required to prove you have a return ticket out of the country and sufficient funds to cover your stay.

On the other end of the scale, if you're planning to dine in good restaurants, attend cultural events, or go to a nightclub, your dress should be reasonably formal. Women should bring at least one nice dress and appropriate shoes, while men will want a lightweight suit, or trousers and sports jacket. Men in Central America often wear collars open at the neck, but you should bring a tie just in case. The *guayabera* shirt is standard apparel for men in Central America and is accepted in all but the most elegant situations. Always worn open-necked and with the hem outside of the waistband, it may have plain vertical tucks or lots of embroidery done in the same color thread as the shirt (usually white, cream, pale yellow, pale blue). Short-sleeved varieties are more sporty, long-sleeved more appropriate for evening wear. If you like that sort of thing and want to go native, it's one local item of clothing that is a good buy.

Other Necessities

Each traveler has a different list of things he or she absolutely cannot live without on a trip. Here's a list of suggestions in case you go blank

when it's time to pack. A penknife, complete with scissor, screwdriver, and bottle opener elements. (Pack this in your checked luggage, or it may be confiscated from you at the security checkpoint.) A flashlight. An alarm clock. (Wake-up calls are unreliable.) A sewing kit and safety pins. A manicure kit with tweezers and nail file. Scotch or adhesive tape. Rubber bands. A good supply of toilet tissue and facial tissues. (Hotels outside of big cities may provide toilet tissue only sporadically, and you are unlikely to find any at all in public places; so carry a small packet of facial tissue in your purse or pocket for emergencies.) Zip-lock plastic bags in various sizes and a couple of big garbage bags. (They're good for separating wet things from dry, clean from dirty.) A flat rubber plug for baths and sinks. A small spiral notebook, for use as a journal as well as a record book for expenses and photos taken. Ballpoint pens. (These make good gifts to children who have a hard time getting school supplies.) Business cards. (It is very Latin to exchange business cards with someone you have just met socially.) A few paperback books you can leave along the way for the times you have to sit and wait for something. (Keep it light, though; literature deemed revolutionary, subversive, or otherwise politically sensitive may be confiscated in a number of countries.) Addresses of people you want to send postcards to. Special soaps, shampoos, and conditioners that might not be available locally. Handiwipes, for use as disposable washcloths. Individually packaged moistened towelettes. (Marvelously refreshing for face and neck when traveling in the tropics.) Earplugs. (Dogs bark at night, roosters crow early in the morning, and traffic tends to be loud, especially if it's a large truck revving its engine or a motorcycle without a muffler.) A small Spanish dictionary–phrasebook. Small packages of snack food (especially good during long car or bus rides).

Leave valuables at home. They may pose a great temptation to potential thieves, and it's not worth the worry of constantly looking after them or the hassle of (futilely) filling out a police report after a theft. But if you do bring something that needs to be locked up in the hotel safe, make sure you can get at it when you need it. You don't want to be running to make an 8 A.M. flight only to find that hotel personnel in charge of the safe are not available.

LUGGAGE. If you are flying to Central America, ask about the baggage allowance of the airlines you'll be using when you make your reservation. Most regulations are pretty standard, but details can change from airline to airline. Generally you are allowed two bags, with the length and width of the larger not to exceed 62 inches and the total dimensions of both not to exceed 106 inches. You can also bring aboard one carry-on, as long as you can stow it under the seat in front of you. Under this arrangement, no bag should weigh more than 70 pounds. As long as the volume of what you're bringing is under regulation, most airlines won't bother about the weight unless you've packed something extraordinarily heavy. Also, if the flight isn't that full, you can probably sneak on a little extra without being charged for excess baggage—but that's taking a chance.

If you're not flying, consider the possibility that you might end up toting your own bags more frequently than you had planned, notwithstanding the availability of all manner of baggage carriers all over Latin America. Take only what you can manage with two hands.

It is best not to bring expensive or brand-new luggage on a Latin American trip. Thieves figure that if the outside looks good, what's on the inside might be even better. Suitcases should have some sort of lock. Combination is best, since a key lock may be opened with *any* key from that series. Luggage should certainly be locked while in transit. Some travelers feel safer if they keep it locked when they're not in their hotel room, too, but this may serve as an advertisement that there's something inside worth taking. All luggage should bear a tag on the outside with the address and phone number of your destination as well as your home address and phone. A slip of paper with this information on the inside will identify the bag as yours if the outside tag is lost.

A carry-on bag should have a sturdy shoulder strap as well as a handle so you can hang on to it closely when you're not actually on a flight. Zippered compartments *inside* a main chamber are best on the theory that the more a thief will have to go through before finding what he's after, the less likely he is to bother. Important documents, such as your passport, airline tickets, medical prescriptions, vaccination booklet, credit cards, and driver's license, should be carried in an inside compartment, but you should be able to get at them fairly easily when you need them. They should never be locked inside checked baggage. Neither should one person carry all the documents (especially passports) for a group. Each person should carry his or her own. Toiletries, cosmetics, medicines, and jewelry also belong in your carry-on, as well as clean underwear, if not an entire change of clothing, in case your main luggage goes astray (not an unusual occurrence).

How you decide to carry your money and traveler's checks may depend on the kind of trip you're taking. Backpackers who are camping and staying in cheap *pensiones* may prefer a money belt, which can be worn while sleeping and taken into the shower if necessary. But this does make getting at one's valuables difficult, if not downright embarrassing, at border crossings or in banks and restaurants. Some packers and other super safety-conscious travelers use a pouch that can be carried inside the front of one's trousers or slung over one's neck and under the armpit. Many travelers find that a thick leather bag (difficult to slit open) with a strap that can be looped over the neck and *interior* compartments to hold money and important documents is safe enough. If not too large, the bag can be tucked inside the carry-on.

You might also take along a French net shopping bag, which scrunches down to a light handful but expands to hold great quantities of Latin American market purchases. A nylon tote bag that folds and zippers down to a small square may also be useful. If you've made more purchases than you planned, for instance, you can jettison dirty laundry into the tote to make room, then pack valuable purchases in your lockable suitcase for the flight home.

Never ever let your baggage out of your sight. You only need to turn your back once and it may be gone. Don't let the airport taxi drivers run off with your things in their effort to hustle business. Hang on to your bags and tell them to wait a sec—*un momento, por favor.*

MONEY AND OTHER LEGAL TENDER. Gone are the days when all Central American currencies were pegged at a fixed rate against the dollar. A number have been devalued recently or are in the process of being deval-

ued. Also, with the current economic problems, there is often a better parallel rate in addition to an official one.

Exchange regulations vary from country to country. In Costa Rica, changing money anywhere but at a bank or your hotel is punishable by a jail term or a heavy fine. The exchange rate at press time can be found in the *Practical Information* sections for each country, but do check out current rates and regulations before you leave.

The traveler's checks you take should be from an internationally recognized company, perferably one that will cash a personal check for you or be similarly helpful if you run short. You should get them in U.S. dollars and in as small denominations as possible. Most Central American currencies are virtually worthless outside their country of origin, since they are generally impossible to exchange once you leave. You want to exchange as little money as possible and spend all the local currency you've got before you leave (putting aside just enough for the departure tax). Don't count on being able to get currency for your next destination at your current one. For example, if you are traveling to the Guatemalan ruins of Tikal from Belize, you'll have to count on the money changers who flock around the border during the busiest crossing hours. They charge a heavy commission, so exchange only what you'll need to reach your hotel.

Carrying cash is risky, but it does have its advantages. For one thing, traveler's checks are difficult to cash in some places, and the process may involve lengthy paperwork in countries like Costa Rica and El Salvador. For another, you're likely to get a much better exchange rate, and you won't have to pay a commission. In addition, U.S. dollars are welcome just about anywhere; for example, you can usually pay for a taxi from the airport to your hotel in dollars when you first arrive, then worry about changing money and figuring out the local currency later. Bring some cash, and make it small bills. One-dollar tips are easy for you and welcomed by maids and bellhops. (Save your quarters. U.S. coins can't be exchanged abroad.) Veteran travelers to Latin America often carry a wad of 20 or 30 one-dollar bills for just such purposes. Also, when you're bargaining for textiles in Guatemala, you're likely to get a much better buy if you offer U.S. dollars. And you may be asked to pay entry or exit fees in dollars if you're crossing land borders.

Keep track of local holidays and weekends. You don't want to run short of money, only to find that the bank is closed. Also, ask when the local payday is. Banks are likely to be mobbed then.

If you're traveling outside of large cities, take lots of small bills in the local currency. Bear in mind that what may be a small bill in the city may be an unchangeable fortune in the countryside.

Because of currency controls, it may not be a good idea to have money sent from home. You may not be able to acquire dollars in the transaction, and you'd hate to end up with, say, $500 worth of Costa Rican colones. Still, if you think you may need to do this, ask your bank at home for the name of a correspondent bank where you'll be. When you're traveling, you can then telex your bank at home and get it to send funds to that local bank.

If you're planning to put a lot of your trip on plastic, bring a couple of credit cards. Major ones are widely used, but some business establishments won't accept all of them.

BACKGROUND READING. The U.S. Department of State publishes and periodically updates pamphlets called *Background Notes* on just about every country on earth. They cover people, geography, history, government, and economy and include a reading list, travel notes, and a map. You can purchase the ones for Central America for $1 or more apiece from the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC 20402; 202–783–3238.

The Department of State's Bureau of Consular Affairs puts out a booklet entitled *Your Trip Abroad,* which discusses everything from how to get a passport to clearing U.S. customs when you return home. It's a handy reference and is available for $1 from the Superintendent of Documents.

If you want to keep up with the news in Central America before you go or once you return, you can subscribe to English-language newspapers such as *The Tico Times,* Apartado Postal 4632, San José, Costa Rica (a weekly covering Central America, at $16.50 for three months); *The Times of the Americas,* 910 17 St., N.W., Suite 321, Washington, DC 20006 (a biweekly covering all of Latin America and the Caribbean, at $25 a year).

PHOTOGRAPHY. Central America is a wonderfully photogenic part of the world, and you will want to take a camera with you. Polaroids are great fun and good ice breakers if you don't mind giving away snap shots, but that can be expensive. For the traveler who wants pictures for an I-was-there album, an instamatic-type camera is a good idea. It will fit in your purse or pocket and won't attract the attention of thieves. If it wasn't too expensive, you won't worry about its being stolen if you leave it behind in your hotel.

The serious amateur will want to take a camera body with strap, a 28mm wide-angle lens for landscapes and crowded marketplaces, a 50mm f/1.8 lens for low-light situations, and some sort of telephoto. (Consider the difference in weight between a 100mm and a 400mm if you'll be walking a lot.) All lenses should have protective skylight filters and lens caps. If you're shooting in color, you might bring a polarizing filter to darken blue skies and an 81B to warm up dull days, but only take them if you know how to use them. Otherwise, they're just dead weight. Most of the action and color here is out of doors, but if you do a lot of indoor photography and don't mind carrying it all, pack a flash, tripod, and cable release. Bring two fresh batteries, and a typewriter eraser to clean oxidation from terminals. You might also tuck in a blower brush, lens tissues, and cotton swabs for cleaning, as well as several sizes of zip-lock bags and Silicagel packets to protect against moisture.

Estimating how much film you will need is always difficult, but whatever you figure, take more. (Each country has its own limit on how much film you can bring in, but customs officials are usually lenient about this if you are a tourist.) Film is terribly expensive in Central America, some kinds may be unavailable, and what is for sale may not be fresh or have been stored under improper conditions. Unless you're doing something special, most of your film should be medium speed (ASA 64 to ASA 125). Take along a few rolls of faster film for low-light situations (ASA 200 to ASA 400) and a few slow rolls (ASA 25) for bright light. Wildlife and bird photographers should concentrate film in the fast range, since many spectacular species live in dimly lit cloud forests. Keep your film as cool

as you can, and don't take it out of its inner container until you're ready to use it, even if you've jettisoned the outer box to save on space.

To avoid problems leaving the country you are visiting and clearing customs on your return home, you should take purchase receipts or a list of all your equipment and its serial numbers to a U.S. customs office and register it before you leave. Foreign countries don't want you to sell the cameras and lenses you've brought with you, and the U.S. customs doesn't want you to sneak home without paying duty on a great photo equipment bargain you got abroad.

One time through a low-dose X-ray machine at an airport probably won't do your film any harm, but if you're taking a number of flights and film is X-rayed several times, your pictures may indeed be spoiled. You can protect film by putting it in a lead-lined film shield bag, which you can purchase at most camera stores. You might also put film in carry-on luggage and ask for a hand inspection. You should not travel with film in your camera, in case it accidentally gets sent through the X-rays or an overzealous customs agent insists on opening it. If you take rolls of 12 or 20 exposures, you can finish a roll of film before traveling without throwing away too many shots.

A camera bag is a definite target for thieves, but it's the best way to carry your equipment. If you're carrying an expensive camera, you're a temptation anyway, so just hang on to everything. Unbreakable metal straps may foil slash-and-run artists. There are some places it may not be wise to take your camera at all, and your hotel should be able to give you advice on this score. Do not leave photographic equipment in your hotel room. Have it locked up in the hotel safe if you can't take it with you.

The act of photographing in Central America is an educational experience these days. For one thing, the region is no longer as innocent as it once was, and you may be asked to pay anyone who appears as a subject in your pictures. Cuna Indians on Panama's San Blas Islands, for example, charge 25 cents per person per photo; natives of Santiago Atitlán in Guatemala charge one quetzal per click—and they count. In addition, photographing military subjects is almost out of the question. Even an innocent shot of a marine taking down the flag at the end of the day outside a U.S. Embassy may incense local army guards at the embassy entrance. When in doubt, move slowly, raise your eyebrows and ask with your eyes before you even focus.

Film processing in Central America, where available, often is not of the best quality. Wait till you get home. If you are on a lengthy trip and can't bear to haul all that film around, you can mail it back. Don't use film company mailers. Stamps reportedly don't stick to them very well, and they draw thieves' attention. Use a strong padded mailer, certify the package, and send it airmail. (Surface mail for this sort of thing might as well be sent by burro, it's so slow.) If you bought the film in the United States, you can send it home duty free. Just mark the package for customs: *Undeveloped photographic film of U.S. manufacture—Examine with care.*

BEFORE YOU GO. Leave your passport number, traveler's checks numbers, airline ticket data, credit card numbers, and any other information you might lose and need in a hurry, along with a copy of your itinerary, with a friend or relative.

GETTING THERE AND GETTING AROUND. By plane. Most visitors fly to Central America. International flights connect the United States with all the region's capitals and some large cities as well. New York, Miami, New Orleans, Houston, and Los Angeles are the U.S. gateway cities to the region. Many flights originate in Mexico City, too, and a whole network of intraregional flights connects Central America's major cities. Latin American airlines are generally the ones that serve this part of the world, and they include *Taca, Tan-Sahsa, Copa, SAM, Aviateca, Lacsa, Aerónica,* and *Mexicana. Pan Am* flies into Guatemala City, San José, and Panama City, *Continental* to San Jose, and Belize City, and *KLM* and *Iberia* serve all three capitals. Panama is the odd country out here, with connections to more U.S. cities as well as to South American and European countries on a variety of international carriers.

Airline fares are in a great state of flux these days. They change daily—literally. And how much you pay will depend on a number of factors, such as your point of departure and destination, the time you are traveling, whether your trip is part of a package, and whether the airline you are using has a special fare offer. Be aware, also, that if a carrier drops a route for any reason, there is automatically less competition, and other airlines that fly to the same destination may boost prices precipitously. Some tips that may help lower your fare: check departure cities other than those closest to you. For example, Continental recently offered a round-trip fare from Houston to San Jose, Costa Rica, that was half the price of most fares. Regional carriers tend to have lower fares, but make frequent stops at countries along the way. You can get significant savings if you don't mind changing planes in Mexico City, the hub for many Central American airlines. Also, keep your eye out for introductory fares as more and more airlines react to the demand for more flights. Travelers to Belize may find it costs far less to fly to Cancún, Mexico, and transfer there for a flight to Belize. In other words, don't always accept the first fare that comes your way.

If you are planning to travel from one Central American country to the next by plane, you should think carefully about whether you want to purchase your tickets ahead of time in the States. If you do so and later decide to alter your arrangements—leave at a different time, say—and need to change carriers, you may have trouble getting one airline to endorse the ticket over to the next. On the other hand, if you wait till you're on the road, you may have to pay a local sales tax (5 percent in Honduras, 10 percent in Costa Rica, for instance).

Latin airlines are chronically overbooked. Make sure you reconfirm your reservation within 72 hours of your departure, then check again 24 hours before flight time. Arrive at the airport with *plenty* of time to spare—at least 2 hours.

Don't book flights back to back on the same day or expect to fly into a Central American country and make quick connections to ground transport. Leave yourself enough time for Latin time. Baggage handling may not be nearly as fast as in the United States, and clearing customs and immigration can be agonizingly slow.

Most Central American countries have internal airlines that serve larger cities and popular tourist spots. In Guatemala, for example, tourists choose between the national airline Aviateca or air-taxi service to the town of Flores to visit the nearby Mayan site, Tikal. Many of these flights are

incredibly inexpensive—$7 to fly from Quepos to San Jose on Sansa in Costa Rica, for example—and are immensely more comfortable and efficient than buses.

By ship. Costa Rica and Panama appear on the itineraries of a number of luxury cruises. Panama City, or the port of Balboa, is especially popular because many ships sail to or through the Panama Canal on their routes. One trip might leave from Tampa, Florida, for instance, calling at Playa del Carmen on the island of Cozumel off Mexico, cruising to and from Gatún Lake in the Panama Canal, then stopping at Aruba, La Guaira, Grenada, Martinique, and Saint Thomas before returning to Tampa. Many round-the-world cruises travel through the Panama Canal, and some put in at Puerto Limón, Costa Rica, or, most likely, Balboa, Panama. Other cruises—out of San Diego, for example—might include stops at Mexican ports on the way down to Central America as well as land connections to San José, Costa Rica, a tour of Panama's San Blas Islands, and transit of the Panama Canal with stops at each end in Colón and Panama City. Still other ships sail from Alaska, stopping in Balboa, Panama, and transversing the Panama Canal on their way to Europe. It all depends on what you want and how much you can pay. Some short cruises cost as little as $2,000. The more monumental ones can run into the tens of thousands.

Cruise lines serving Costa Rica or Panama include *Holland America-Westours* and *Windstar,* 300 Elliott Ave. W., Seattle, WA 98119, 800–426–0327; *Cunard Line,* 555 Fifth Ave., New York, NY 10017, 212–880–7500; *Sitmar Princess Cruises,* Century City, 10100 Santa Monica Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90067, 800–421–0522; *Crystal Cruises,* 2121 Ave. of the Stars, Los Angeles, CA 90067, 800–446–6645; and *Costa Cruises,* World Trade Center, Miami, FL 33130, 305–358–7330.

Ford's International Cruise Guide, published quarterly, gives details about a great number of U.S. cruises going to all sorts of places. It costs $9.95 an issue or $34 a year and can be obtained from Ford's Travel Guides, 19448 Londelius St., Northridge, CA 91324.

The same company puts out *Ford's Freighter Travel Guide* semiannually for $8.95 or $15 a year. Travel on a passenger-carrying freighter is much cheaper than on a luxury liner, but it does depend on the commercial considerations of trade routes and cargo.

By bus. A brochure put out by Panama's Tourist Bureau notes that a bus ride from Panama City to San José, Costa Rica, "costs about one-fifth of the air fare, takes about 16 times as long." That about sums up bus travel in Central America, but in a region where money is scarce and time is no object, it is *the* method of transportation par excellence.

If you're coming down through Mexico by bus, *Greyhound* travels as far south as Laredo, Texas. They will sell you a through ticket to Mexico City, but since they feel the Mexican connection is unreliable, they won't quote a schedule. You have to cross the border and get on the Mexican bus yourself.

A company called *Ticabus* used to run Greyhound-style buses to all the Central American capitals, but it reportedly has suspended most services. Now it connects only Costa Rica, Nicaragua, and Panama. Other lines are still making the long runs between countries, but no one seems to be going everywhere, the way Ticabus did.

If you are traveling by bus, you should arrange all your visas ahead of time. You cannot hop out of one of these buses at the border and try to negotiate a tourist card. In fact, the bus driver will probably run everyone's passport and personal identification by the border guards en masse. These are popular routes, so you should also book your passage well in advance of when you want to leave and be prepared for layovers of a couple of days in capital cities until you can get another passage to the next capital.

The local bus network in Central America is vast. Schedules may be erratic, buses are slow and often crowded with passengers standing in the aisle, and you may have to share a seat with a chicken or two. Buses are also extraordinarily cheap and go just about everywhere, not only stopping at various locations within large cities but also going off the highways down dirt roads to tiny towns.

On all Latin American buses, you will want to sit toward the front of the bus. The rear is quite a bit more bouncy, and the engine is located there, so it can be hot and noisy. Rest stops are few and far between and may not be even close to U.S. standards, so go easy on liquids beforehand and take Lomotil for diarrhea.

We do not recommend traveling alone at night on buses; inquire locally about the safety of this.

By taxi. All Central American capitals, and some large cities, have taxis. They are much less expensive than those at home, running not more than a dollar or two for a normal ride and certainly less than $10 an hour. Taxis traveling to and from airports may charge more. In addition to the flexibility they offer over city buses, they also remove you from the theft and sexual harassment (if you're a woman) fostered by the close confines of public transport. They are often not metered, so agree on a price before you get in. You'll get a better deal, of course, if you speak Spanish and are familiar with local customs.

By car. Other forms of transportation can't beat being able to throw your gear into a car and take off whenever you want to wherever strikes your fancy. Flying into your destination and renting a car locally is the quickest and least arduous way of acquiring wheels during a trip. Major car rental companies, and sometimes local ones, have facilities in all Central American capitals, especially at airports and in large hotels. But they tend to be expensive, as is gasoline, almost all over the region.

Four-wheel-drive vehicles are good to have if you want to visit the out-of-the-way beaches or Monteverde Cloud Forest in Costa Rica or the jungle ruins in Guatemala and Belize. Jeeps usually cost $10 to $20 more than standard vehicles. In Belize, a Jeep with insurance and unlimited kilometers will cost more than $100 per day. Whatever you drive, be sure to check the car for dents before leaving the rental office. Rocky, bumpy roads wreak havoc with paint jobs, and you could be charged for someone else's carelessness.

People with a good chunk of vacation time who genuinely enjoy driving may consider taking their own car down. It's a long haul, but you can get all the way down to Panama's Darién Gap on the Pan-American Highway. (The route stops in the Darién about 200 miles short of the border with Colombia. The official reason the highway has not been completed is that it would encourage the transmission of South America's hoof-and-mouth disease northward. It also, obviously, impedes the northbound drug trade. When the road will be finished, if at all, is anyone's guess.)

Before you set off on such a safari, you should have a mechanic check your car from top to bottom. Mechanics in Central America can be quite good and cheap (they'll do 10 hours of work on your car for about $60 in Honduras, for example), but you would hate to get stuck in some out-of-the-way place over something you could have prevented at the outset.

Precautions notwithstanding, things do go wrong. Make sure you're prepared. Take a jack, and know how to use it, as well as a kit of standard car tools. You may not know what to do with all of them, but mechanics along the way will. A repair manual with diagrams may be similarly useful. Good tires are a must in this part of the world, as is a spare. Tires take a beating over potholes, mud and gravel, and cobblestones. Pack as many spare parts as you can. Things like a fan belt, an extra diaphragm for the gas pump, a spare condenser and rotors for the distributor, spark plugs, an extra set of points, a washer for the gas filter, and fuses for the lighting system may not always be available along the way. (Latin American mechanics are wonderfully inventive, since they often can't get proper parts and have to come up with novel solutions to keep local vehicles on the road. There are limits, however, and you should prepare yourself for the possibility of having to wait for a part to be flown in from the States if something major gives out.) Jumper cables are a good idea, and also flares, a water jug (radiators often boil over at highland altitudes, and you may have to make a water run to the nearest house or village), electrical tape, and a flashlight, as well as a funnel, length of hose, and gas container for siphoning gas. (In some countries, like Guatemala, it is considered a normal courtesy to give a bit of gas to motorists who have run out along the road. And you may run short, yourself.)

A U.S. driver's license is generally recognized in Central America, but an international driving permit issued by the American Automobile Association is a good thing to take along as well. It's valid in all countries in the region and has an explanatory page in Spanish, so there will be no doubts or misunderstandings. It costs $7 for members, $12 for non-members, and you'll need two passport-size photos and a currently valid driver's license.

Good maps are essential for this sort of venture. Bradt Publications (41 Nortoft Rd., Chalfont St., Peter, Bucks SL9 OLA, England; also available from International Travel Map Productions, Box 2290, Vancouver, B.C. V6B 3W5, Canada) is reputedly the best source of Latin American maps, though proprietor George Bradt admits that Central American maps are particularly difficult to come by these days because of current political difficulties. Some tourism offices, particularly in Costa Rica, have good road maps, though they may be outdated. Failing those possibilities, you may have to pick maps up as you go along. National geographic institutes in the capital cities of many Central American countries often have splendid maps that show types of roads, the size of towns (and, hence, an indication of the quality of food and lodging), the location of gas stations, and points of interest (such as archeological sites).

Since you will be driving through Mexico, you will need to get in touch with the nearest Mexican consulate to negotiate a transit visa for your car. If you don't do this ahead of time, Mexican border officials may send you back to the nearest consulate in the United States, thus adding an extra day to your trip, or may charge you whatever fee they feel like, which may be far in excess of the official rate.

You can purchase car insurance for your trip through Mexico at the U.S.–Mexico border, and if you get it from *Sanborn's*, they will supply you with detailed road logs that take you town by town, street by street, through Mexico on the route you have planned. You can write ahead for more information and a list of their offices to Box 1210, McAllen, TX 78501.

Some countries require you to have an internationally valid car insurance policy. Even in countries where it is not mandatory, it's a good idea. People are generally not cautious behind the wheel, and accidents are frequent. It's a macho society—Costa Ricans *boast* that they have the region's highest rate of auto accident fatalities. You may be able to arrange a policy before you leave home from a U.S. company dealing in international insurance, but as of 1986, AAA discontinued its Central American coverage. Policies issued in Guatemala are often good for the whole region, or you can negotiate the matter country by country.

Border crossings are the bane of driving in Central America. Countries are small, so crossings are frequent—and they often seem to take forever, although it may only be hours. You will need vehicle registration papers as well as a passport so that officials may stamp a car entry permit into it. (They want to make sure you leave with a vehicle if you enter with it.) You will have to clear immigration as well as customs (two stops), and you may be asked to take just about everything out of your car. Your car probably will be fumigated as well. (Central American economies are heavily based on agriculture, and countries can't afford to have devastating pests spread across the region.) All of this usually requires a series of fees. And even when you think you've left it all behind, there may be more customs officials down the road double-checking the honesty of those at the border. Look and act your best at border crossings. There is no international audience at these border crossings, as there is at airports, and *everything* is up to the discretion of the border authorities. Try to cross during the normal workday, and bear in mind that the hours officials work on each side of a contiguous border may be different. After-hours crossings may cost more. If your Spanish isn't good, border crossings may be even more difficult; keep this in mind before deciding to drive through Central America at all.

Before you start off on your trip, try to get the most current information from embassies and consulates about border crossings. For instance, the crossing between Nicaragua and Costa Rica was just recently reopened; you would have been stranded in Nicaragua when it was closed, though with determination and patience, you might have made it through with all the right paperwork.

Road conditions vary widely here, and even in the same country you may find they range from perfectly fine highways (usually well-traveled routes such as the Guatemala City–Antigua run) to rock and mudhole swaths that don't look like much more than wide cowpaths (the road through Guatemala's Petén to Tikal, for instance). The Pan-American Highway is in *great* disrepair in spots, so if you're traveling on that route, ask as you go along. Locals may know better and faster ways of getting to where you want to go. Roads are the main transport arteries through the region, so highways are likely to be filled with exhaust-belching, road-hogging passenger buses and freight trucks.

Many road signs nowadays are done in pictures, and the ones below are fairly common. Still, many directions are given in Spanish. Even if you don't speak the language, you should be able to recognize them if you are driving. The ones you're most likely to see are the following:

alto	stop
bajada	downgrade
bajada frene con motor	steep hill; brake with engine
camino angosto	narrow road
camino cerrado	road closed
camino en reparación	road under repair
carril izquierdo sólo para rebasar	left lane for passing only
ceda el paso	yield
conserve su derecha	keep right
cruce	crossroad, crossing
cuidado	be careful
curva forzada	sharp turn
curva peligrosa	dangerous curve
despacio	slow
desviación	detour
dirección única	one way
escuela	school
grava suelta	loose gravel
hombres trabajando	men at work
no estacionarse	no parking
no hay paso	road closed
parada obligatoria	full stop
peligro or *peligroso*	danger or dangerous
pendiente peligrosa	dangerous grade
poblado próximo	town nearby
puente angosto	narrow bridge
siga en fila	follow single file
topes	traffic control bumps
una vía	one way
un solo carril	one lane
viraje obligatorio	obligatory turn
zona de derrumbes	landslide zone

The *puente angosto* sign is often found in the countryside, sometimes hand-lettered. It means not only that the bridge is narrow, but also that it will accommodate only one vehicle at a time. Such structures are negotiated on a first-come, first-serve basis.

A circular sign bearing two crossed black lines and FC (for *ferrocarril*) indicates a railroad crossing.

Topes or *túmulos* are a series of washboardlike bumps designed to make vehicles slow down, often at the entrance to a town or to a residential neighborhood in the city. They can be quite wicked, so take them very easy.

Shoulders of the roads are often narrow, and pedestrians use them as sidewalks, night and day. Also, livestock is often unpenned and may stroll across the road toward the grass that's greener on the other side. Piles of rocks or tree branches that signaled a breakdown may be left on the highway after vehicles have finally moved on. All this, plus dubious road conditions, make night driving extremely dangerous and something to

Highway Signs

avoid. If you must travel at night, try to follow a local car (at a distance). The driver will be familiar with the road and may react to anything out of the ordinary more quickly than you can.

It's a good idea to slow down and beep your horn before you take sharp curves in the mountains. If you barrel on through, you may get halfway around and come face to face with another vehicle that has careened into your lane.

If you're going up into the mountains or on unpaved roads, use a four-wheel-drive vehicle with high suspension. Even the road to Chichicastenango, Guatemala, may stall an ordinary car with four gears.

Unleaded gas may be hard to find in Mexico, and it does not exist farther south, so you will have to unhook your catalytic converter. Never let your gas tank fall below the half-full mark. There may be a gas station marked up ahead on the map, but it may be waiting for a shipment and not have a drop.

Unscrew your U.S. license plates and put them *inside* the car, showing through the back window. They tend to disappear, since they are great souvenirs. And in countries with political problems, they may be lifted by unsavory characters who put them on their own cars, which they then use to commit dastardly deeds.

Take everything that is easily removable off the outside of your car and stash it in the trunk. Likewise, use a gas cap with a lock. And don't leave anything of value in your car, locked or not. At night leave your car only in an attended lot (*estacionamiento*) or in your hotel parking space. If you park on the street during the day and someone offers to watch your car for you (usually a small boy or an old man), agree and let him know you'll pay a few units of local coin when you return. If he knows he's getting paid, at least he won't steal anything.

If you are going to Central America for a substantial stretch oftime and want to ship your car down, you will need a freight forwarder to book your car on a ship and deal with the copious paperwork. Such agents are listed in the telephone yellow pages of port cities, and the port authority may be able to help you find one as well. Cost will vary according to how heavy your car is and how far you're sending it, but a Baltimore–Costa Rica shipment, for instance, might run $1,500.

By rail. Railroads generally transport bananas, not people, in Central America. There are two well-known exceptions that tourists might be interested in: the train linking San José and Puerto Limón, Costa Rica, and the one that runs across the Isthmus of Panama between Panama City and Colón. Both have regular daily schedules.

CREATURE COMFORTS AND COSTS. There are hotels and restaurants to fit almost every taste and pocketbook in Central America, but the selection, as well as the price, will depend very much on where you are, both within a given country, and from country to country within the region. Deluxe international-name hotels with pools, room service, air-conditioning, televisions—the works—are mostly in capital cities, though hotels in the Belize cays and the resort islands off the Honduran coast can be just as luxurious and expensive. A room in a Honduras Bay Island hotel, including boating, snorkeling, and three meals a day, may run $150 a day, double occupancy. A double at the Marriott in Panama City is around $135 a day. It all depends where you are.

Capitals and large cities have the widest selection of hotels, ranging from the top of the line noted above to spartan pensiones or *casas de huéspedes* (guest houses) where a room and a shared bath may go for $5 or so. Mid-range hotels can be found for around $25 to $35 (in Belize City, $25–$100 per day). They may lack the pool and air-conditioning, but you probably will get your own bath. What they lack in amenities, they may well make up for in charm—some are lovely Colonial-style buildings with cool tile floors and bougainvillea-decked patios.

Outside big cities, the selection—and the luxury—are more limited, but prices are quite a bit lower as well. In the colonial town of Antigua, just a 45-minute drive outside Guatemala City, a double room in a quiet, clean small hotel that was once an old Spanish house built around a garden courtyard may cost $15. The farther you stray from modern bustle, the fewer creature comforts you are likely to find.

Restaurants tend to reflect the situation of hotels. In capitals and large cities, there is generally a wide selection of domestic and international cuisines at a range of prices. In San José, Costa Rica, for instance, you can get a filet mignon for two for $25. At the other end of the scale, a meat stew with tortillas and beans might be a couple of dollars. Smaller towns may have only one or two less expensive restaurants, and the menu will be limited to local dishes—sometimes written each day on a chalk board—depending on the produce available.

Within the region as a whole, Panama is probably the most expensive. The prices of hotel accommodations, restaurant meals, and evening entertainment are definitely on the high side, since this is an international business and banking center, and prices are what the market will bear. Department store price tags are about on par with those in the United States, and you probably won't do any better with the bargains in duty-free stores than you would in a weekend of shrewd shopping in New York.

A few additional notes about hotels and restaurants. Some hotels do not have hot water all the time. Inquire about hours when you check in, or you may be surprised with a cold shower in the morning.

At times some places may not have water at all. In Santa Elena, the closest town to Tikal in Guatemala, for instance, there is no water during certain hours of certain days. The hotel management will let you know. Many of the lodges and hotels in jungle regions don't have hot water at all. Some on the coast use salt water for their showers, which can be far from refreshing. Bring along a jug of water for your final rinse.

Power failures black out many parts of Central America fairly frequently; bring a flashlight and keep it in your day pack or purse. Out-of-the-way hotels often have their own generators, which run for only a few hours at night. Most places supply guests with candles and matches.

Motels and autohotels rent by the hour in this part of the world and are no place for weary tourists.

Before you plan your trip, find out when major holidays and local fiestas are celebrated. They are often fun to see and participate in, but the rest of the country may be on the move, too, and hotel reservations may be hard to get. Holy Week is particularly bad for accommodations all over the region, and Panama is mobbed by shoppers before Christmas, so make sure you have a hotel room waiting for you before you set off from home.

Taxes and tipping. A number of countries charge a tourism tax on hotel room bills—usually 5 to 10 percent. Also, a value-added tax, or IVA (*im-*

puesto de valor agregado), may be tacked on to your restaurant check. A typical IVA is that of Belize, which ranges from 7–10 percent, depending on the article or service purchased. In Costa Rica, a 10-percent gratuity will automatically appear on your restaurant check. Elsewhere in the region, 10 percent is a reasonable tip, except in Panama, where the constant stream of high rollers from around the world has boosted tipping to an international 15 to 20 percent.

SPORTS. Central America offers all sorts of participatory and spectator sports for the athletically minded or competitive traveler. In many instances equipment can be rented, but if you prefer your own, pack it. A partial list includes: golfing, tennis, bowling, swimming (in pools, Atlantic and Pacific oceans, lakes, and thermal springs), volcano climbing (with the Club de Andinismo in Guatemala, for instance), fishing (sport fishing tackle is reportedly in short supply in Costa Rica, so bring your own), skin diving and snorkeling (you might want to bring your own mask, fins, and snorkel), sailing, waterskiing, hang gliding (at Lake Atitlán in Guatemala), surfing (supposed to be good off Puerto Quepos in Costa Rica, and so spectacular off El Salvador that surfers continued to visit even through the worst of that country's troubles), wildlife and bird-watching (bring binoculars), hiking (wear high-topped boots against snakes in the back country), bullfighting (strictly a spectator sport), horseback riding, baseball, spelunking (in Belize), cricket (also in Belize), and white-water rafting (in Costa Rica). For those of you who like a friendly wager, there is horse racing in Panama (all of the Panamanian jockeys now working in the United States got their start at the President Remon Racetrack there), cockfighting and gambling (roulette and a type of blackjack in some hotels in Costa Rica; roulette, dice games, blackjack, and slot machines in Panamanian casinos).

SPEAKING SPANISH. The shape that your trip ultimately takes will depend on how much Spanish you speak. Although Belize is an English-speaking country, some Indian groups still speak original native tongues, and English is the compulsory second language in schools in Panama, the region as a whole is Spanish-speaking. In capitals and large cities many people, including tourism professionals such as hotel receptionists, speak excellent English and will, in fact, prefer speaking that with you if your Spanish is less than fluent. Many more people in spots frequented by tourists speak a passable variety of English, and they'll have as much fun practicing with you as you will trying your Spanish out on them. If you have come to Central America on a guided tour or are spending most of your vacation at a large hotel in a capital city and taking local tours to see the sights, the vocabulary you will need is minimal.

If, however, you plan to be a bit more adventurous and perhaps try out local public transport, you should know enough Spanish to at least get you back to your hotel. (Remember to keep the name and address of your hotel in a purse or pocket. If you get hopelessly lost, you can always hop a taxi, show the driver your cheat sheet and be deposited safely back where you started.) A basic vocabulary of maybe 500 words that will allow you to order food in a restaurant and inquire about transportation routes, fares, and schedules—Where does it go? How much does it cost? When does it leave?—will help enormously, and you might tote a pocket dictionary

or phrasebook along so you can look things up as you go. As some travelers point out, though, it's not formulating the question that's the hard part. It's understanding the answer.

The farther off the beaten tourist track you get, the more heavily you will have to rely on Spanish. Most people in small towns in the countryside will not speak or understand English at all—and if their first language is an Indian dialect, they may not speak much Spanish either. If your Spanish is similarly weak, you may find yourself incommunicado, and although you may be able to mimic your way through a meal, fixing a car breakdown is another matter entirely. In fact, it is inadvisable to drive down to Central America or to drive extensively around parts of the region with serious political problems if you speak no Spanish. You can't count on border guards or personnel at civilian and military road checkpoints to speak much English at all, and a trouble-free passage through those spots depends on your doing precisely what they tell you to. (This is not to say that you might not get by those spots more easily if you pretend to speak less Spanish than you do, if you're fluent. Exceptional ability in Spanish may indicate to a soldier that you have been trained by the U.S. government.)

When you're learning a language, there is no substitute for being in a country where it is spoken, and many travelers find that a session or two of Central American Spanish classes helps them polish what they already have learned in the States or gives them a good foundation for future study. Language schools are numerous in Latin America, and you should be able to find an intensity and a schedule that suits you. Programs in Guatemala have a reputation for being particularly good at total immersion, with students housed in non-English-speaking homes and paired one-on-one with a tutor during the day so they are obliged to speak Spanish all the time.

ELECTRICITY. Electrical current in most of Central America is 110 volts–60 cycles, and U.S. plugs are used. There is usually not a third opening for a grounding prong, however, so bring an adapter if your appliances need it. Electricity in some countries (Belize and Honduras, for example) may run at 220 volts in places, but that's usually in private homes. Blackouts are not unusual all over the region, so your razor, travel alarm, hair dryer, curlers, and radio–cassette player should be battery-powered unless you don't mind waiting till the current comes back on. You should have no problem clearing customs with any of those appliances if it is obvious they are for your personal use. Officials at land borders may take longer to sift through it all, though. Larger appliances may require more red tape, so check with embassies or tourist offices before you set off.

MEASUREMENTS. Central American countries function under the metric system. Aside from buying food by the kilo at the market, you are most likely to have to deal with this when you're keeping track of your car speed on highways in kilometers per hour (about double miles per hour) and filling the tank with liters of gasoline (about four per gallon). The following chart should help you keep it all straight.

CONVERTING METRIC TO U.S. MEASUREMENTS

Multiply:	by:	to find:
Length		
millimeters (mm)	.039	inches (in)
meters (m)	3.28	feet (ft)
meters	1.09	yards (yd)
kilometers (km)	.62	miles (mi)
Area		
hectare (ha)	2.47	acres
Capacity		
liters (L)	1.06	quarts (qt)
liters	.26	gallons (gal)
liters	2.11	pints (pt)
Weight		
gram (g)	.04	ounce (oz)
kilogram (kg)	2.20	pounds (lb)
metric ton (MT)	.98	tons (t)
Power		
kilowatt (kw)	1.34	horsepower (hp)
Temperature		
degrees Celsius	9/5 (then add 32)	degrees Fahrenheit

CONVERTING U.S. TO METRIC MEASUREMENTS

Multiply:	by:	to find:
Length		
inches (in)	25.40	millimeters (mm)
feet (ft)	.30	meters (m)
yards (yd)	.91	meters
miles (mi)	1.61	kilometers (km)
Area		
acres	.40	hectares (ha)
Capacity		
pints (pt)	.47	liters (L)
quarts (qt)	.95	liters
gallons (gal)	3.79	liters
Weight		
ounces (oz)	28.35	grams (g)
pounds (lb)	.45	kilograms (kg)
tons (t)	1.11	metric tons (MT)
Power		
horsepower (hp)	.75	kilowatts (kw)
Temperature		
degrees Fahrenheit	5/9 (after subtracting 32)	degrees Celsius

TIME ZONES. Central America is six hours behind Greenwich Mean Time, the same as U.S. Central Standard Time. Panama is five hours behind GMT, the same as U.S. Eastern Standard Time. There is no daylight savings in Central America, so calculate accordingly.

COMMUNICATIONS. Central America is connected to the rest of the world by long-distance telephone, cable, and telex lines. You may have to wait awhile in some countries for an international phone call to go through, and calls are liable to be expensive—about $13 for a three-minute call from Guatemala to Alabama, for instance. Calls from your hotel room may end up being quite a bit more expensive than normal long-distance rates, so inquire before dialing. You may also only be able to make collect calls to North America, not Europe.

Sending mail home is no problem, though it's best to use airmail rather than the slow surface service. Getting mail sent down to you is another matter. If you know where you'll be staying, you can have it sent to your hotel. Tell the sender to mark it "hold for arrival" in case it gets there before you do. If a letter is mailed to you in care of a U.S. embassy or consulate, it probably will be returned to the sender, though other countries' officials may be more helpful for their citizens. And although American Express offices were once *the* place for international wanderers to pick up mail sent to them abroad, it is an expensive service that the company would rather not continue. If you're interested, ask your local representative whether the office in your destination country is still in the mail business. If so, you'll have to have an American Express credit card or traveler's checks to use the service. The main post office of each city will hold mail for you as long as it is addressed care of the *lista de correos* at the *oficina central de correos.* If the postal worker can't find something you know should be there, have him look under your middle name. Latin last names are compounded differently, and it may be filed under that. Usually you will be charged a small fee for each letter you pick up. Do not have cash or checks sent through the mail. They probably won't make it. Do not have packages sent to you and do not send down packages to friends once you return home. Customs duties are often many times what the contents are worth.

SAFETY. Theft is a big problem for tourists all over Central America. Foreign visitors are the haves traveling in a have-not part of the world, and of course their possessions will represent a great temptation to certain segments of the population. We have given advice on how to protect yourself in various sections above, but it really is not all that different from what you would do in a big city in the United States. There's no need to spoil your trip with paranoia. A healthy case of caution will do. Violent crimes are rare here. You may get your purse snatched, but it is unlikely that you will be physically assaulted in the process. Belize City (dubbed Pirate City by some), Panama City, and the Darién are probably the most dangerous spots as far as crime is concerned.

Drivers are crazy throughout the region. Exercise *extreme* caution when you are crossing streets.

Political turmoil and the dangers it presents are of great concern to travelers, of course, but these are precisely the subjects it is most difficult to give definite advice about. Situations vary greatly from country to country, and things are changing so quickly that a hot spot one day might be safe the next. Still, the whole region is not out in the streets shooting at one another the way it sometimes seems in newspapers and TV news. You can travel quite comfortably and quietly through much of Central America,

and danger is the exception rather than the rule. The following, as general rules of thumb, may help you stay clear of those exceptions.

The places where everyone else is working, playing, and traveling are the safest. The farther you get away from population centers and into mountains and jungles, the more likely you are to run into something scary. Border areas are particularly bad. The Guatemala–Belize border isn't very friendly, since Guatemala doesn't recognize Belize as a country. The Guatemala–Mexico border has a great Guatemalan refugee problem. The Honduras–Nicaragua and Costa Rica–Nicaragua borders are tense for political–ideological reasons. In addition, specific areas within a country should be avoided. As of this writing, for instance, northwestern Guatemala sees sporadic guerrilla action and army "sweeps." The danger in these areas is not so much that you would be a target of attack as that you might blunder into something unknowingly. The U.S. Department of State's Office of Overseas Citizens Emergency Center (2201 C St. NW, Washington, DC 20520; 202–647–5225) issues travel advisories that evaluate dangerous situations around the world. You can write for copies on Central American countries, and travel agents, airlines, and passport agencies should have them as well. Once you're on your trip, local people you meet will be able to fine-tune that information, telling you exactly where to say away from and what roads have been closed. They will also be able to fill you in on local quirks that you wouldn't otherwise know about. In certain countries, for instance, tying a white handkerchief to the antenna of your car indicates that it is a civilian vehicle and the guerrillas know to leave it alone.

A number of countries have set up military and civilian checkpoints along the roads. As a tourist, you should be able to pass through quite easily as long as you do what you are told. Usually you will be waved on without even being asked for your passport if it's obvious that you're a tourist. In general while traveling in the region, but specifically at these checkpoints, never make derogatory remarks in English. People may understand more than they let on.

Officials are very document-minded here. Make sure your papers are in order and always carry them with you. It is against the law not to have proper documentation with you in Costa Rica, and you may be jailed if you don't.

Bribing authorities is common in many parts of Latin America. But don't try it unless you know what you're doing.

If you're concerned about conditions where you will be traveling, you might consider registering with the nearest U.S. embassy or consulate so that officials can get hold of you in an emergency. If things go amiss, friends and relatives at home can call the Department of State's Office of Overseas Citizen Services at 202–647–5225 to find out if you're all right.

Consular officials can be of great help to you if you run into trouble, though they do have their limits. They can't get you out of jail, but they can help find you a lawyer, try to get you relief from inhumane or unhealthy conditions, and arrange for loans for a dietary supplement. They can help you wire friends or relatives for money if you run short or are robbed. The Department of State doesn't like to advertise it, but consular officials can make you a small *reimbursable* loan to tide you over while you wait for funds from home, and they can make you a *reimbursable* repatriation loan to get you back to the United States (*not* to continue your

trip) if you can't arrange to get more money from home. They also deal with medical emergencies, deaths, missing persons, and various types of legal matters, such as notarizing documents that you hope you'll never need. If you want to know about this kind of assistance in detail, you can write for the *Handbook of Consular Services* from the Public Affairs Staff, Bureau of Consular Affairs, U.S. Department of State, Washington, DC 20520.

ILLEGAL ACTIVITIES. Drugs are not the problem in Central America that they are in Mexico and South America, but several countries in the region are being used as trans-shipment areas, so illegal substances are around. Penalties in drug cases are stiff (*years* in jail under unsavory conditions, to say the least), and generally no distinction is made between hard and soft drugs and between possession and trafficking. If you are caught with illegal drugs, you will receive no special quarter or treatment simply because you are a foreigner. You will be handled like any other person in that country arrested in a similar situation. The legal process is a long one, and you may be imprisoned without bail for years until your case is heard, on the theory that you are guilty until proven innocent. Don't count on being able to serve part of your sentence in a U.S. jail either. Panama is the only country in the region that has a prisoner transfer treaty with the United States.

As we have pointed out previously, appearance has a lot to do with how officials treat you on this score. If you look scruffy and act at all disoriented, officials may tend to suspect that you are carrying drugs with you—and may plant some on you for good measure. If you roll your own cigarettes, officials may view you as suspect, too. Leave the rolling papers at home.

Conducting unauthorized archaeological excavations or trafficking in antiquities are illegal in many parts of the region. Stick to reproductions. A variety of other activities are illegal in various countries, too. In Belize, for instance, it is against the law to remove from a reef, and export, black coral as well as to pick orchids in forest reserves. Tourist literature supplied by embassies and tourist boards usually includes appropriate warnings.

CLEARING U.S. CUSTOMS. U.S. residents who are out of the country at least 48 hours and have claimed no exemption during the previous 30 days are entitled to bring home duty-free up to $400 worth of gifts or items for their personal use. If you buy clothing abroad and wear it during your travels, it is still dutiable when you return to the United States. For the next $1,000 worth of goods beyond the initial $400, customs inspectors will assess a flat 10 percent duty across the board, rather than hit you with different percentages for different types of goods.

The $400 duty-free allowance is based on the full fair retail value of the goods, and you must have those goods with you. You may make an oral declaration if items don't exceed the $400 allowance, but it's best to keep all your purchase receipts together and handy in case you are asked to produce them. Every member of a family is entitled to the same $400 exemption, regardless of age, and members of a family can pool their exemptions.

You may include 100 cigars (not Cuban) and 200 cigarettes in your $400 exemption as well as 1 liter (33.8 fluid ounces) of alcoholic beverages if you are 21 or older—all subject to the laws of the state in which you are arriving. If you exceed these limits, you must pay duty, the internal revenue tax, and possibly a state tax.

The U.S. Customs Service *Know Before You Go* pamphlet includes all the information above and more. You can get a copy by writing to U.S. Customs Service, Box 7407, Washington, DC 20044, or by calling 202–566–8195.

Since 1976, under the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP), approximately 2,800 items from developing countries may be brought into the United States duty-free. The purpose of this is to help the economic development of such countries by encouraging exports. All the Central American countries and Panama benefit from the GSP, so many items you buy there will be exempt from duty. Write to the Department of the Treasury, U.S. Customs Service, Washington, DC 20229, for the latest edition of the pamphlet *GSP and the Traveler,* which explains the system and lists types of products exempted.

Gifts that cost less than $50 may be mailed to friends or relatives at home, but not more than one per day of receipt to any one addressee. Mark the package "unsolicited gift" and list its contents and retail value. These gifts must not include tobacco, liquor, or perfumes containing alcohol that cost more than $5.

Packages mailed to yourself are subject to duty. Your best bet is to carry everything with you, even if you have to pay for excess baggage. Mail out of Central America can be slow and unreliable.

Do not bring home any agricultural items. They can spread destructive pests and diseases, and it is illegal to import them. For details contact APHIS, Department of Agriculture, 6505 Belcrest Rd., Federal Bldg. Room G–110, Hyattsville, MD 20782; 301–436–8413.

In recent years many plants, birds, animals, and marine mammals have come under protection as endangered species. They and their products cannot be brought into the United States. For details contact the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Department of the Interior, Washington, DC 20240; 703–358–2104.

VOLUME 20 Navajo to Opium

THE ENCYCLOPEDIA AMERICANA

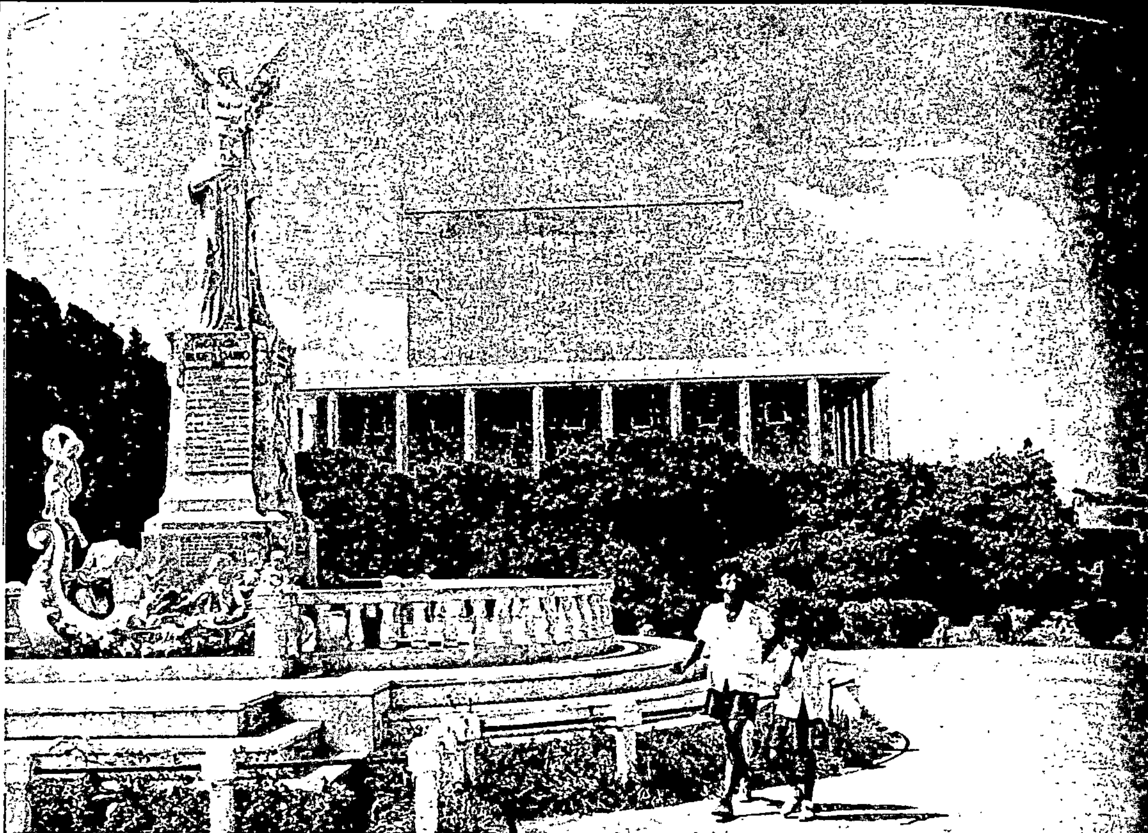
INTERNATIONAL EDITION

1989

COMPLETE IN THIRTY VOLUMES
FIRST PUBLISHED IN 1829

GROLIER INCORPORATED

International Headquarters: Danbury, Connecticut 06816



© LISA QUINONES/BLACK

A statue of the great Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío stands in front of the theater named for him in Managua.

NICARAGUA, nik-ə-rä'gwə (Spanish, nē-kä-rä'gwä), a country in Latin America. Lying at the geographic heart of Central America, Nicaragua is the largest and least densely populated country of that region. A tropical land of lakes and volcanoes, cool mountains, torrid plains, and sweltering jungles, it is home to an ethnically diverse population of *mestizos* (persons of mixed white and Indian ancestry), whites, Indians, and blacks. As in the rest of Central America, the economy is based on agriculture.

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Though Nicaragua was never home to a high Indian culture comparable to that of the Maya farther north, the area had about a million inhabitants living for the most part in relatively advanced agricultural societies when the Spaniards arrived in 1522. In establishing colonial rule, however, Spain destroyed both the indigenous societies and most of their inhabitants, many of whom were sold into slavery. During its three centuries as a colony Nicaragua developed an export-based economy, and the foundations were laid for future political conflicts.

The 19th century brought independence to Nicaragua but also political turmoil and temporary conquest by a North American adventurer. The restoration of self-government in 1857 established a peace that encouraged economic and social development. But this quiet period was shortlived. A revolution in 1910 ushered in a quarter century of unrest, which prompted the United States to send Marines to Nicaragua and was followed by 43 years of dictatorial rule by the Somoza family. In 1979 a popular revolution led by the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) overthrew the Somozas.

1. The Land

Nicaragua has three major geographic regions: the Pacific Lowlands, the Central Highlands, and the Atlantic Coast. Each of these zones displays dramatic physical, economic, and demographic differences from the others.

The Pacific Lowlands. Western Nicaragua is essentially a low-lying plain crossed by a chain of volcanoes and containing two large lakes. Along the southwest coast is a narrow northward extension of the Costa Rican highlands.

The eruptions of western Nicaragua's volcanoes, many of which are still active, have devastated the land but also have enriched it with layers of fertile ash. The geologic activity that produces vulcanism also breeds powerful earthquakes. Tremors occur regularly throughout the Pacific zone, and earthquakes have nearly de-

INFORMATION HIGHLIGHTS

Total Area (land and inland water): 46,430 square miles (120,254 sq km).
Boundaries: *North*, Honduras; *east*, Caribbean Sea; *south*, Costa Rica; *west*, Pacific Ocean.
Elevations: *Highest*—Cerro Mogatón (6,913 feet, or 2,107 meters); *lowest*—sea level.
Population: (1988) 3,600,000.
Capital and Largest City: Managua.
Major Languages: Spanish (official), English, and Miskito.
Major Religious Group: Roman Catholics.
Monetary Unit: Cordoba (= 100 centavos).
For Nicaragua's flag, see under FLAG, both illustration and text.

royed the capital city, Managua, more than once.

Much of the Pacific Lowlands is covered by Central America's largest body of inland water, Lake Nicaragua. It is fed from the northeast by Lake Managua through the short Tipitapa River and is drained from the southeast by the San Juan River, which flows into the Caribbean Sea. The southwestern shore of Lake Nicaragua lies within 15 miles (25 km) of the Pacific Ocean. Thus the lake and the San Juan River were often proposed in the 19th century as the longest part of a canal route across the Central American isthmus.

Most of the Pacific zone is *tierra caliente*, the "hot land" of tropical Spanish America at elevations under 2,000 feet (600 meters). Temperatures remain virtually constant throughout the year, with highs ranging between 85° and 90°F (29°–32°C). After a dry season lasting from November to April, rains begin in May and continue to October, giving the Pacific Lowlands 40 to 60 inches (1,000–1,500 mm) of precipitation. Good soils and a favorable climate combine to make western Nicaragua the country's economic and demographic center.

The Central Highlands. Significantly less populated and economically developed are the Central Highlands, which are broad in the north but narrow southeastward between Lake Nicaragua and the Caribbean. Forming the country's *tierra templada*, or "temperate land," at elevations between 2,000 and 5,000 feet (600–1,500 meters), the highlands enjoy mild temperatures with daily highs of 75° to 80°F (24°–27°C). This region has a longer, wetter rainy season than the Pacific Lowlands, making erosion a problem on its steep slopes. Rugged terrain, poor soils, and low population density characterize the area as a whole, but the northwestern valleys are fertile and well populated.

The Atlantic Coast. The Atlantic (Caribbean) coastal lowland differs from the rest of the country both physically and socially. It is an area of high temperatures and heavy year-round rainfall totaling more than 100 inches (2,500 mm). Rain forest and poor leached soils make it unsuitable for cultivation. Before 1894 most of this thinly populated zone was called the Mosquito Reserve. So named for its Miskito Indian inhabitants, the area was not under Nicaraguan jurisdiction.

Natural Resources. Besides the rich soils of its Pacific zone, Nicaragua also possesses commercially viable deposits of copper, gold, and silver, along with valuable stands of tropical hardwoods and rich fisheries. Although the country has some scope for hydroelectric development, its most important energy resource is geothermal power from its volcanoes.

The Economy

Nicaragua's economy has always been built on exports deriving directly from natural resources. The first major export was slaves; then indigo, at one time a valuable natural dye; in the modern economy, coffee came to head the list of raw-material exports. Nicaragua prospers or declines as international markets and prices for its primary products rise or fall. Even though manufacturing and commerce contribute as much value to the national economy, they cannot pay for the goods that the country cannot produce and must obtain from abroad.

Agriculture. After 1950 the scope of capital-intensive modern agriculture increased greatly. This growth was concentrated in export crops, while crops destined for domestic use continued to be produced by traditional labor-intensive methods. The shift to industrialized agriculture also significantly reduced the proportion of the population directly dependent on farming.

Commercial agriculture thrives in the Pacific Lowlands, where cotton and sugarcane are the chief crops. Although coffee is grown in the Pacific zone at elevations over 1,000 feet (300 meters), the most important coffee zone is the northwestern part of the Central Highlands, from Matagalpa to Jinotega. Cattle for the export of beef are raised in the southeastern part of the highlands. The overall expansion of export production by large landholders pushed the smallholders who produced the country's maize (corn), beans, and other dietary staples onto marginal lands, with the result that food production could not keep up with population increase.

Forestry and Fishing. Just as agriculture is the economic key to western and central Nicaragua, forestry and fishing are the bases of the eastern commercial economy. In national terms, however, neither sector is important, the two combined rarely accounting for even 1% of the gross domestic product (GDP).

Mahogany was harvested commercially on the Atlantic coast beginning early in the 19th century. In the 20th century pine stands began to be exploited. In neither case, though, was the resource managed so as to ensure a sustained yield.

Nicaragua's fishing industry operates off both coasts and in freshwater Lake Nicaragua. The most valuable catches are shrimp and spiny lobster. A turtle fishery thrived on the Caribbean coast before it collapsed from overexploitation.

Mining and Energy Production. Mining is not a major industry in Nicaragua, contributing only about 0.5% of GDP. Still, gold and silver mines in the north central and northeastern part of the country are important elements of regional economies and constitute reliable sources of government revenue.

© DIEGO GO[illegible]

Cattle are driven to market in Nicaragua's Central Highlands, which produce beef for export.

About half of Nicaragua's energy is produced by wood, the most common cooking and heating fuel in rural areas. Important domestic sources of electrical energy are hydropower and geothermal power, the later from the volcano Momotombo, near Managua. But most commercial electricity, is generated by imported petroleum.

Manufacturing. Although the manufacturing sector of the economy contributes somewhat more to GDP than agriculture, it employs far fewer people. Concerned largely with the processing of agricultural products, it supplies the domestic market with foods, beverages, edible oils, cigarettes, and textile goods. Also manufactured are light metal goods, construction materials, wood and paper products, and chemicals such as fertilizers and pesticides.

Transportation. As is true of all public services in Nicaragua, transport services are adequate in the west but poor in the center and east of the country. Roads are the main arteries, although only about one sixth of them are paved. Particularly important is the Inter-American Highway, which links Nicaragua to its neighbors. The only railroad carries freight and some passengers between Corinto, the major Pacific port, and the principal cities of the western lowlands.

No rivers are navigable in the west, but the Río Escondido in the Caribbean lowlands is important for transportation. Domestic and international air service is provided by the national carrier.

Foreign Trade. Nicaragua exports primary products and imports manufactured consumer goods, machinery, and petroleum. The leading exports are coffee, cotton, sugar, beef, and bananas. Foreign trade, which was once heavily dependent on the United States, became more diversified as commercial relations were developed with the European Economic Community, the Socialist bloc, and the Central American Common Market.

3. The People

Most of Nicaragua is *mestizo*, Roman [illegible] lic, and Spanish speaking. About two thi[illegible] the people live in the Pacific Lowlands, [illegible] jority of them in its cities. Cultural and cla[illegible] ferences are major social cleavages.

Ethnic and Cultural Distinctions. Althou[illegible] population of Nicaragua is overwhelmingly [illegible] *tizo* (76%), the country has significant ethn[illegible] norities of blacks and mulattoes (11%), [illegible] (10%), and Indians (3%). Ethnicity or race, [illegible] ever, correlates with social conflict only in[illegible] as it involves cultural differences. The term [illegible] *dino* ("Latin") frequently is used in referenc[illegible] the Hispanicized 95% of the population, w[illegible] includes the *mestizos*, whites, and mulatto[illegible] The remaining 5%, concentrated in the Atla[illegible] zone, is black or Indian, is Protestant, and d[illegible] not use Spanish as its preferred language.

The Atlantic Coast is often called Mosquit[illegible] or Miskitia, because of its rural population [illegible] Miskito "Indians," a people of mixed Indi[illegible] African, and European ancestry who have th[illegible] own language. In the Caribbean port tow[illegible] most of the people are blacks of West Indi[illegible] ancestry and speak English. Ethnolinguist[illegible] and religious distinctiveness, coupled with ge[illegible] graphic isolation and a history of conflict, cause[illegible] *costeños* (inhabitants of the Atlantic Coast) [illegible] view the Hispanicized majority of Nicaragu[illegible] with suspicion and hostility.

Religious Groups. Some 85% of Nicaraguans are at least nominally Roman Catholic, a legacy of the Spanish colonizers. However, the Catholic Church in Nicaragua never had the political weight of the ecclesiastical hierarchy in many other parts of Latin America. Liberation theology became influential in the latter half of the 20th century, producing a cadre of radical Christians who were active in the overthrow of the Somoza government.

Protestantism arrived in the 19th century when Moravians established missions on the Atlantic Coast. In the late 20th century fundamentalist evangelical sects made greater headway than mainline Protestant denominations and became the fastest-growing religious element in the country.

Social Structure. The traditional Nicaraguan social structure includes a very small upper class, a slightly larger technical-professional middle class, a small industrial working class, and an overwhelmingly large peasantry. Within the upper class, rural landowners predominate over urban merchants and industrialists. The peasantry has both subsistence and market-oriented sectors, the latter having distinct rich and poor strata. Other social categories consist of landless rural workers and a class of urban workers engaged in marginal activities such as street vending, the "informal sector" of the economy. Historically, opportunities for social mobility were limited unless a person belonged to a dictator's coterie. For the rural poor, two avenues of social mobility were open: migration to the cities, with adoption of an urban occupation, and enlistment in the rank and file of the military.

Urbanization. More than half of Nicaragua's people live in cities, and in the Pacific region this proportion reaches two thirds. Managua is the administrative, commercial, industrial, and cultural center as well as home to 30% of the national population. No other city, even historically important León and Granada, is even a tenth its size. Important regional commercial towns like Matagalpa, Estelí, or Jinotega in the Central Highlands and Bluefields or Puerto Cabezas on the Atlantic Coast are really only large towns.

Nicaraguans in cities traditionally have enjoyed better health care, educational and cultural facilities, and occupational opportunities than those in rural areas. One aim of the Sandinista government was to reduce such disparities between town and country.

4. Education and Culture

As in many developing countries, access to education in Nicaragua was long skewed in favor of the elite. Consequently, a literate, "high" culture attuned to Europe developed beside a popular culture based on oral tradition and indigenous themes.

Education. Nicaragua's first public primary school opened about 1837. By the late 1860's public grade schools existed in most of the larger cities. In 1877, Nicaraguan authorities accepted the principle that such schools should be nationally funded, and that attendance should be free and compulsory. In 1881 education was formally removed from religious control and turned over to government, but religious schools continued to operate. Subsequently shortages of facilities and teachers, especially in rural areas, hampered educational development, a problem that plagues the country even today.

Higher education dates from 1818 when the National Autonomous University of Nicaragua (UNAN) was founded in León. A major reform, begun in 1980, reorganized the country's post-secondary system into two universities: the UNAN, with campuses in León and Managua, and the Central American University in Managua. It also restructured the curriculum, giving more emphasis to science and technology, and less to law and commerce.

Culture. Nicaragua calls itself a land of poets, and its outstanding cultural figure was the poet Rubén Darío, a founder of Spanish American modernism. (See MODERNISMO.) Among later eminent writers, the revolutionary poet Father Ernesto Cardenal became minister of culture, and the Sandinista novelist Sergio Ramírez served as vice president of the republic. Popular culture has been built around religious themes. Large processions are held on Good Friday, the feast of the Immaculate Conception (the most important holiday), and the feast day of the patron saint of the town or parish.

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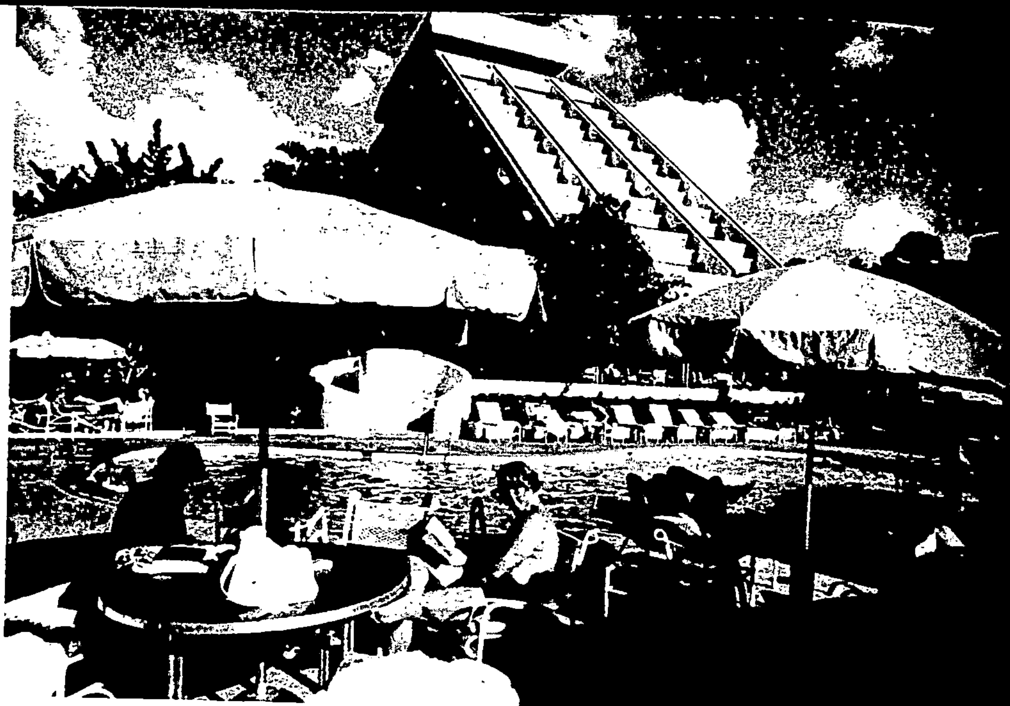
... doubles as a bus on a ... road. The sign re... citizens, "You must do your Patriotic military service is ... obligation." Both men and ... were recruited into the ... People's Militia ... an instrument for mass mobilization as well as ...



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A Managua hotel designed in the shape of a pre-Columbian pyramid withstood the devastating 1972 earth...

5. History and Government

When Columbus first sighted Nicaragua's Atlantic shore in 1502, the country supported two distinct indigenous cultures. In the Pacific Lowlands agriculturalists maintained extensive trade relations, lived in towns, and had complex political structures. The natives in the Central Highlands and Caribbean zone were hunters and gatherers whose societies were less sophisticated. Nicaragua probably was named for a powerful Central American Indian chief, Nicarao.

The Hispanic Period. The superior soil and climate that permitted an advanced Indian society to flourish in the west also attracted the Spaniards, led by Gil González in 1522. The colonizers, seeking easy riches, began to export natural resources, beginning with Indian slaves, causing Nicaragua's native population to fall from around one million to about 10,000 in 60 years. Slaves were soon replaced by a succession of other staple commodities: hides, grain, cocoa (cacao), and indigo.

In 1524 the conquistador Francisco Hernández de Córdoba had founded two cities, one on each of Nicaragua's great lakes. Granada, on Lake Nicaragua, became the center for an elite engaged in hacienda agriculture. León, first located on the shore of Lake Managua but moved 30 miles (50 km) to the west in 1610 after a volcanic eruption damaged the city, was built around merchants and artisans. Conflict between these two cities and the social forces they represented would shake Nicaragua until the 20th century.

Independence and Conflict. Nicaraguans first revolted against Spain in 1811. As in all Spanish America, rebels rose to free commerce from colonial restrictions and to ensure that American-born leaders would assume control of government. Nicaragua's first rebellion was quashed within six months, but ten years later all of Central America declared independence. Once separated from Spain (1821) and Mexico (1823), Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica established the United Prov... of Central America.

This federal union opened the way for ... war in Nicaragua, as Liberals from León b... Conservatives from Granada for supre... Withdrawing from the federation in 1838 did ... end the conflict. Indeed, between 1821 ... 1857, Nicaragua was beset by continual civil ... The violence took many lives, destroyed ... property, and wrecked the economy.

But the country's chronic turmoil did no... courage foreign interest in Nicaragua as the ... of a possible canal between the Atlantic and P... cific oceans. Both the United States and Gr... Britain surveyed routes in the 1830's, and Fr... tried to negotiate a canal treaty in the 1840... While the actual construction of a Central Am... ican canal would have to await the traffic to j... tify the project's huge cost, everyone could pl... ly see that the great commercial powers had ... growing interest in Nicaragua.

The attention of foreign powers was costly ... Nicaragua. The British stake in the region dat... from the 17th century when England began ... assert military control over the Atlantic coast ... ensure the security of its Caribbean colonies. A... that time England made allies of the Miskito ... diplomacy that put the "Mosquito Shore" under direct British protection until 1787 and left Lon... don in effective control of the Atlantic zone until 1894.

American interest in Nicaragua received ... strong impetus in 1848 when the British seized San Juan del Norte at the mouth of Río San Juan, renaming the settlement Greytown. Washington was alarmed by new British activity in an area seen as vital to U.S. security. William Walker, a Tennessee-born adventurer, had the greatest im... pact on Nicaragua of any American in the 19th century. Brought to Nicaragua in 1855 to fight for the Liberals in a civil war, Walker defeated the Conservatives but then stayed on to make himself dictator. It took the combined armies of all the Central American republics to defeat Walker and his Phalanx of American Immortals in 1857.

Modernization and U.S. Occupation. Peace ned in Nicaragua for the next 36 years. A ies of Conservative governments maintained bility, oversaw the building of railroads, and omoted coffee cultivation. This period of stality ended in 1893 when a coup brought a beral government dominated by José Santos laya. Though called a dictator and a tyrant, laya was notable for accelerating the Conservatives' modernizing schemes and succeeding thout war in bringing the Atlantic coast under caraguan control in 1894. Zelaya's downfall sulted from his interference in the affairs of ighboring countries and, even more, his insisnce on planning a Nicaraguan canal with Geran and Japanese aid to rival the U.S. project in nama. In 1909, U.S. military forces supported uccessful Conservative rebellion.

In 1912, faced with a rebellion against his n government, the Conservative president olfo Díaz asked the United States to send ops to help him restore peace. The Marines ded in 1912, stayed until 1925, left for nine nths, then returned and remained until 1933. t even they could not keep order. A revolt by Liberals in 1926 required U.S. diplomatic ervention to obtain a truce. One Liberal genl did not accept the truce: Agusto César Sando instead took up arms to drive out the Amerins. For five and one-half years the Marines d the U.S. trained Nicaraguan National Guard sued him without success. Never defeated, ndino laid down his arms only in 1933 when U.S. forces left. In return, the Nicaraguan vernment agreed to amnesty for Sandino's my, the Sandinistas, and give them land to set agricultural cooperatives. Though Sandino cepted the government's offer in 1934, the deal s never put into effect. Just after signing the cord, Sandino was kidnapped by the National ard and executed.

The Somoza Era. Anastasio Somoza García, own as Tacho, entered Nicaraguan public life 1927 when his command of English, learned ring three years in Philadelphia, got him a job interpreter for the head of the U.S. delegation t to negotiate an end to the Liberal revolt that an in 1926. He gained national office in 2 when he was made commander of the National Guard, Nicaragua's army. By 1937 he had patched Sandino and his guerrillas and shed the republic's president, his wife's uncle, m office. Thus he established the basis for a ily dynasty that ruled Nicaragua until 1979. The first Somoza was a traditional *caudillo*, or in American strongman. Politically, this ant staying in power by changing the constition, rigging elections, using graft, and emying the National Guard as a coercive force. en he was assassinated by a young poet in 6, Somoza was the richest man in Nicaragua. Tacho was succeeded by his eldest son, Luis moza Debayle. The politically astute Luis ted the family out of the spotlight of governnt and sought to make use of the Liberal Party an instrument of indirect rule. He failed in goal because his brother Anastasio, another cho, insisted on having his turn as president. In 1967, Anastasio Somoza Debayle duly bee president of the republic. Although politlly less sophisticated than his father and ther, Tacho probably would have succeeded nding power on to his son but for the develing Managua earthquake of 1972. In rebuilding the city, Somoza could not resist the temptation to enrich himself. His doing so alienated the elite, who had been his supporters, and paved the way for his fall. The 1978 assassination of an opposition leader, newspaper publisher Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, further outraged Nicaraguan opinion. By September 1978, Somoza faced a general insurrection involving all sectors of society and led by the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN). Within a year, Somoza was out and the FSLN in.

The Sandinistas. The FSLN was founded in 1961. Inspired by the Cuban revolution of Fidel Castro, the Sandinistas at first sought to organize peasant support in Nicaragua's Central Highlands. In this and most of their early efforts, they were unsuccessful. Only in 1977, after the death of their chief theoretician, Carlos Fonseca, and a subsequent breakup of the organization into three parts, did the FSLN revise its tactics. Two of these factions, or *tendencias* ("tendencies"), were dogmatic Marxists: Prolonged People's War, favoring peasant links, and the Proletarian Tendency, looking to urban workers. After the reunification of the FSLN, the Third, or Insurrectionist, faction emerged as the dominant partner. Known for their ideological flexibility, the Insurrectionists built a broad, multi-interest alliance of all groups who were against Somoza: workers, peasants, and the poor, but also politically active Christians and many middle-class people.

After taking power on July 19, 1979, the FSLN set up a Governing Junta of National Reconstruction (JGRN), an executive body with five (later three) members. By 1980 a representative body, the Council of State, was in operation. Unlike most assemblies, the Council of State was not elected by geographic constituencies but was appointed by key groups in the society. Thus it had representatives of business, the military, labor, and the various organizations affiliated with the FSLN, such as the Sandinista defense committees. Overall, the original Sandinista machinery of government was well suited for carrying out rapid social change.

These governmental institutions began to change by 1982 as more conventional instruments of rule were developed. Elections held in 1984 led to the replacement of the Council of State by a National Assembly, whose members represented the voters of territorial districts. As well, the appointed JGRN gave way to an elected president and vice president. A further step toward giving the new regime a permanent basis came in 1987 when a new constitution was adopted. A mix of radical and conventional elements, it recognized Nicaragua's multiethnic nature and guaranteed political pluralism, a mixed economy, nonalignment in foreign affairs, civil liberties, and socioeconomic rights.

A similarly dramatic change occurred in agrarian reform. Every agrarian reform aims to break up inefficiently large farms and redistribute them to the landless, either in cooperatives or as private plots. The FSLN's reform, which began with the confiscation of the rural holdings of the Somozas and their coterie, made the government owner of one fifth of Nicaragua's arable land. Almost all of this land had been set up for large-scale agribusiness and thus was unsuitable for distribution as private peasant plots. This was not seen as a problem, as Sandinista thinking favored large-scale farming and co-ops over small

individual farms. By 1985, though, it was apparent that government policy had failed to meet the demands of the rural poor, an important base of Sandinista support. Therefore the government amended its policy to permit individuals to receive land titles and gave less emphasis to cooperatives.

Most Sandinista social and economic policies changed less dramatically, however. From the beginning the government aimed at building a mixed economy that the public sector would lead, setting priorities for private enterprise. Although state ownership increased, the majority of enterprises—and also the largest ones—remained in private hands. These policies worked for a few years, but shortages and inflation soon plagued the economy. Economic failures, however, could not be attributed to the government alone. For example, a global fall in the prices of primary commodities left the country with a chronic balance-of-payments deficit and a huge foreign debt. The goal of Sandinista social policy was to provide good health care, housing, and education to all Nicaraguans. Despite a promising start—for example, a literacy drive that taught 400,000 people to read—efforts in these areas slowed after 1982 as resources were diverted to fight a counterrevolutionary insurgency.

In 1981 a counterrevolutionary army (the "contras"), founded on the remnants of Somoza's National Guard and organized by the U.S Central Intelligence Agency with Argentine and Israeli help, launched a war of attrition against the Sandinista government. To combat the insurgents, the government had to build a huge army and devote as much as half the national budget to defense. Unofficial estimates put the total cost of the war to the Nicaraguan government at over $2 billion, or more than the annual GDP, during the first five years alone. And this assess[illegible] ignored the human cost of the conflict: 20[illegible] dead, counting both sides, and total casualties [illegible] 40,000. Further, perhaps 250,000 refugees [illegible] created by the fighting. None of a series of [illegible]ties proposed between 1983 and 1986 by [illegible] Contadora countries (Colombia, Mexico, P[illegible]ma, Venezuela) to resolve this problem as part [illegible] a general resolution of the crisis in Central Am[illegible]ica proved acceptable to all the parties. Exp[illegible] gave a better chance of success to a 1987 propos[illegible]al made by Costa Rican President Oscar Ar[illegible] known as the Esquipulas II Treaty in L[illegible] America and the Arias Plan in North America [illegible] was signed by the presidents of the five Cen[illegible] American republics.

Overall, the changes wrought by the Sa[illegible]nistas were less comprehensive than those [illegible]ing from most revolutions. The economy [illegible] not entirely reorganized, though resources [illegible] redistributed toward the poorer classes. T[illegible] general structure of society was not greatly [illegible]tered, even though the old elite lost much of [illegible] influence. Meanwhile the FSLN moved aw[illegible] from its original radical political structure, [illegible] which it monopolized power, toward one rec[illegible]nizing as legitimate the existence of other pol[illegible]cal interests.

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Sandinista troops guard against Contra attacks. A mother is depicted as "with my sons in defense of the country."
© VIVIANE MOOS/THE STOCK [illegible]

NICARAGUA, Lake, nik-ə-rä'gwä, the largest lake in Central America, situated in southwestern Nicaragua at an elevation of 105 feet (32 meters). Oval in shape, it measures about 100 miles by up to 45 miles (160 by 70 km) and reaches a depth of 230 feet (70 meters). Its area of some 3,100 square miles (8,030 sq km) makes it the largest body of fresh water between the Great Lakes of North America and Lake Titicaca in Peru and Bolivia.

Lake Nicaragua is fed at its northwest end by the Tipitapa River, which is the outlet of smaller Lake Managua. It is separated from the Pacific Ocean by the Rivas Isthmus, only 12 miles (19 km) across at its widest point. Because the Continental Divide follows this isthmus, Lake Nicaragua drains by way of the San Juan River into the Caribbean Sea.

The lake is dotted with hundreds of small islands, whose scenic beauty is a major tourist attraction. The largest island, Ometepe, has two volcanoes. Zapatera ("Shoemaker") is noted for pre-Columbian stone images and shoe-shaped pottery. On the lake's northwestern shore stands the city of Granada, overlooked by the volcano Mombacho.

Lake Nicaragua contains sharks, tarpons, and other fish usually associated with salt water. It is believed that the lake was formed by the closing of an ocean bay owing to volcanic action and that marine life adapted to new conditions as the water gradually became fresh.

NICARAGUA CANAL PROJECT, nik-ə-rä'gwä, a proposed ship canal to connect the Carribbean Sea and the Pacific Ocean by way of southern Nicaragua. The canal would follow the San Juan River from the Caribbean to Lake Nicaragua, cross the lake and cut through the narrow Rivas Isthmus to reach the Pacific. The transit distance would be 173 miles (278 km).

Spain, which long had considered an interoceanic canal, surveyed the Nicaragua route in the 16th century. After the breakup of the Spanish American empire, the United States was attracted to the project. American interest led to treaties with Nicaragua during the 19th century and to the Clayton-Bulwer Treaty with Great Britain in 1850. The latter agreement in 1850 provided for joint U.S.-British control of any canal that might be built across Central America, Panama, or the Tehuantepec Isthmus of Mexico. It was superseded by the Hay-Pauncefote Treaty of 1901, which gave the United States the right to build its own canal in the region.

An American company started work on a Nicaragua canal in 1887; it failed through lack of funds. From 1895 to 1900 the U.S. government considered resuming the project, but political considerations and other factors resulted in selection of the Panama route.

After the Panama Canal was opened, the United States maintained interest in an alternative shipping route through Nicaragua in case the Panama Canal became inadequate. In 1916 the U.S. Senate ratified the Bryan-Chamorro Treaty, by which Nicaragua gave the United States sole right to build and protect the proposed canal. An international court ruled that the rights of Costa Rica and El Salvador had been violated, but the U.S. government ignored the decision. However, the United States never exercised its option, and the treaty was abrogated

NICE, nēs, a resort city on France's Côte d'Azur and the capital of the Alpes-Maritimes department. Located on the Bay of Angels of the Mediterranean Sea, Nice (Italian, Nizza) is protected on the north and northeast by the Maritime Alps, at whose base it lies. The city occupies the area that lies on both sides of the Paillon River, a mountain torrent.

Nice's gentle climate and beautiful location on the bay, near pine forests and fragrant herb-covered hills, have made it one of the most attractive resorts on the French Riviera. Although tourism is its chief industry, flowers, perfumes, olive oil, and candied fruits are economically important.

The Old and New Towns. The Place Masséna, the focal point of the city, lies between the Old and New towns, which are separated by esplanades that cover the Paillon River for part of its course. The Old Town, east of the Place Masséna, is a district of winding, narrow, often hilly streets, old houses, and ruined palaces. Its colorful flower market is on the Cours Saleya. Bounding the Old Town on the east is a rocky promontory that was once the site of a castle and is still called the Château. East of the promontory is the small harbor Port Lympia. The New Town, to the west of the Place Masséna, is crowded with fashionable shops, hotels, restaurants, and cafés. The famous Promenade des Anglais, so named because it was begun by the English colony in 1822, runs along the Bay of Angels and its pebbly beaches.

The Resort City. Nice was first developed as a winter resort. The English writer Tobias Smollett was one of the first to describe its attractions to his compatriots when he published an account of his visit to Nice in 1764. Wealthy Englishmen soon were drawn to the sunny coastal town, to be followed in the 19th century by other Europeans, particularly Russian aristocrats, and then by the French themselves. With the completion of a railroad from Paris to Nice in 1865, Nice became one of Europe's most fashionable winter resorts. After World War I the tourist season shifted from winter to summer. By that time writers and artists had begun to reside there or in the city's environs; their numbers were to include Jules Chéret, Marc Chagall, and Raoul Dufy. Henri Matisse was to spend the last years of his life nearby.

The Carnival City. The pre-Lenten carnival draws visitors to Nice in the slack tourist season. It lasts ten days, ending on Mardi Gras with the burning in effigy of the King of the Carnival. Its elaborate floats and skillfully made, larger-than-life papier-mâché figures, confetti battles, fireworks, and masked balls make this one of the most popular carnivals in Europe.

Cultural Life. In addition to the Nice Opera and the Nouveau Théâtre de Nice, the city's major cultural attractions are its museums, particularly the Matisse Museum, which was greatly enriched in 1979 by the bequest of the artist's son Jean. Works by Chagall are on permanent exhibition in a museum devoted to his art. The Jules Chéret Museum contains not only works by Chéret but also by Dufy, Van Dongen, Vuillard, and Picasso, as well as by artists from earlier periods.

History. Called Nikaia by the Greeks and Nicaea by the Romans, Nice was a Greek colony of Massalia (modern Marseilles) before it passed to Rome. With the advent of the Middle Ages,