

TREASURES OF CENTRAL AMERICA – 2017

OVERVIEW

Tour Date: 18 March 2017 – 15 April 2017

Tour Duration: 29 days

Tour Cost (\$AUD): \$17,990

Single Supplement (\$AUD): \$3,580

There are few parts of the world that offer such diversity as awe-inspiring Central America. Our incredible 29-day itinerary features four of the most stunning countries in the region: Panama, Costa Rica, Honduras and Guatemala.

Panama is the starting point for this tour with a boat cruise along one of man's greatest engineering masterpieces, the Panama Canal. Next stop is Costa Rica with its erupting volcanoes, spectacular wildlife and primeval cloud forest of Monteverde. For many people, the jewel in the crown of this sparkling tour is Guatemala. We visit the stunning colonial city of Antigua, before heading for the shores of magnificent Lake Atitlan, described by English writer Aldous Huxley as 'the most beautiful lake in the world'. Crossing the border into Honduras, we visit Copan, one of the most spectacular centres in the Mayan world, built around the fifth century AD, before crossing back into Guatemala to continue our journey north to the Rio Dulce and Livingston. Finally, we enjoy a candle-lit dinner in the heart of the breathtaking ruins of Tikal, the greatest of all the Mayan archaeological sites. This remarkable journey is an eclectic mix of breathtaking natural beauty, ancient heritage sites and diverse cultural experiences.

Tour Fitness Level: Moderate

TREASURES OF CENTRAL AMERICA 2017

TOUR ITINERARY

18/03/2017 Sydney – Los Angeles

Fly from your preferred capital city to Sydney, to connect with our flight to Los Angeles. Crossing the International Date Line, we arrive in Los Angeles on the same day.

Depart Sydney Qantas QF 11, 10.30

Arrive Los Angeles 06.25

On arrival we transfer to our hotel.

Crowne Plaza Los Angeles Airport

Los Angeles

19/03/2017 Los Angeles (B)

Today is entirely at leisure in Los Angeles.

20/03/2017 Los Angeles – Panama City (BD)

This morning we transfer to the airport for our flight to Panama City.

Depart Los Angeles Copa Airlines CM 473, 11.30

Arrive Panama 19.50

On arrival we transfer to our hotel.

Le Meridien Hotel

Panama City

21/03/2017 Panama City (BLD)

The most dynamic capital in Central America, Panama City has both a 'Manhattanesque' business centre and a marvellous heritage-listed old heart. Today we concentrate on the latter with our city tour of the area known as Casa Vieja, which abounds with superbly preserved and restored historic buildings. This was the second city of Panama, founded in 1673 after the destruction of the first city and constructed as a fortification to protect it from pirate attack. Today, the restoration of colonial convents and residences continues and gives a sense of how magnificent the area must have looked in past years. In the afternoon we drive to the Miraflores Locks for our first view of the magnificent Panama Canal.

22/03/2017 Panama City (BLD)

This morning we visit a fascinating community of the Embera Indians. Originally from the remote Darien rainforest area of Panama, these people dress very much as they did when Christopher Columbus arrived in the 1500s.

23/03/2017 Panama City (BLD)

Today we experience the Panama Canal by ship, train and coach. Completed in 1914, the 77-km stretch of water, affectionately known as 'the Big Ditch', remains one of the greatest engineering achievements in history. Commencing on the Pacific coast, our voyage takes us through the incredible locks of Miraflores and Pedro Miguel as well as the extraordinary Gaillard Cut. Disembarking in Gamboa, we continue by road to Colon on the Atlantic coast where we board the Panama Canal Railway – the world's first Trans-Continental rail route which cuts through dense jungle alongside the canal. We arrive back in Panama City in the evening after a momentous day.

24/03/2017 Panama City – San Jose (BLD)

Today we board our flight to San Jose, capital of Costa Rica.

Depart Panama City Copa Airlines CM 144, 09.05

Arrive San Jose 09.30

Today is a visual feast of sightseeing. We drive first to the famous Poas Volcano, just outside San Jose, where the view of the volcano from the rim of the crater is breathtaking. Heading towards the Caribbean zone of Costa Rica, we visit the La Paz Waterfall Gardens. After a short stroll along spectacular trails, we see the beautiful Magia Bianca Falls and the world's largest butterfly observatory.

Presidente Hotel

San Jose

25/03/2017 San Jose – Tortuguero (BLD)

After breakfast we drive to the Caribbean side of Costa Rica, to the stunning Tortuguero National Park. The park has an incredible biological diversity, due to the existence within the reserve of 11 different habitats including rainforest, swamps, beaches and lagoons. It is very humid due to its tropical climate and receives 250 inches of rain a year. Tortuguero is not accessible by road so we make the final part of our journey by boat. We stay at the delightful Evergreen Lodge, on the banks of one of the waterways that make up this extraordinary area. After lunch we enjoy a twilight river safari.

Pachira Lodge

Tortuguero

26/03/2017 Tortuguero (BLD)

Today we again venture into the national park which is home to hundreds of endangered or threatened species, including jaguars, tapirs, ocelots, cougars, river otters, and manatees. As well as amphibians, reptiles and mammals, there are 300 bird species including the great green macaw and swallow-tailed hawks and vultures. The wide-open canals make viewing easier than at many other parks – superb for spotting crocodiles, giant iguanas, and basilisk lizards basking atop the branches. Many of the animals found here are under threat from fruit plantations, logging companies and hordes of cattle that use the grounds near the park gates for grazing.

27/03/2017 Tortuguero – La Fortuna (BLD)

We leave Tortuguero and drive to the shores of Lake Arenal where a boat awaits us. We cross the lake and continue by road to the town of La Fortuna, in the shadow of the mighty Arenal volcano. The rest of the day is at leisure. We stay in one of the country's most famous hotels with fantastic views of the volcano, where you can soak up the sight as you soak in the hotel's luxurious hot pools.

Arenal Kioro Hotel

La Fortuna de San Carlos

28/03/2017 La Fortuna (BLD)

The Arenal is one of the world's most active volcanoes and a truly stunning sight. Today we explore the area thoroughly and may even see the volcano erupt. We also explore the surrounding forest, which is home to a dazzling array of flora and fauna.

29/03/2017 La Fortuna – Monteverde (BLD)

After breakfast we cross the Arenal Lake to Monteverde. The Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve is acclaimed as one of the most outstanding wildlife sanctuaries in the Americas and includes eight distinct ecological zones. It protects more than 400 species of birds and more than 100 species of mammals. In addition to the gloriously dazzling quetzal, we may see the endangered

bellbird, or emerald toucanet. There are also 30 species of hummingbirds. Before dinner we enjoy a night hike through the forest, with the chance to see sloths, foxes, coatis, raccoons and many other animals.

El Establo Hotel

Monteverde

30/03/2017 Monteverde (BLD)

Early this morning we enjoy a guided tour through the Cloud Forest Reserve. The forest has a primeval feel and a staggering array of flora and fauna. After lunch we take the famous skywalk tour through the forest canopy, which gives unparalleled views of the lush surroundings.

31/03/2017 Monteverde – San Jose (BLD)

This morning we visit the amazing Selvatura Park. Bridges above the trees give us fantastic views of the cloud forest. After lunch we drive to San Jose.

Holiday Inn Express Forum Hotel

San Jose

01/04/2017 San Jose – Guatemala City – Antigua (BLD)

This morning we transfer to San Jose airport for our flight to Guatemala City.

Depart San Jose Aviateca AV 732, 12.10

Arrive Guatemala City 14.30

On arrival we make the 45-minute transfer to the beautiful colonial city of Antigua and check into our hotel.

El Convento Boutique Hotel

Antigua

02/04/2017 Antigua (BLD)

Considered the most beautiful city in all the Americas, Antigua has it all. Flanked by three majestic volcanoes, it is full of glorious Spanish colonial architecture, manicured parks, cobbled streets, superb restaurants, art galleries and shops. The best way to discover Antigua is on foot and this morning we enjoy a guided walking tour. The build-up to Easter begins two weeks prior, and on Sundays the whole town celebrates for many hours with a magnificent procession that winds its way through the narrow streets. We have plenty of time to enjoy this fantastic spectacle.

03/04/2017 Antigua (BLD)

This morning we visit some of the delightful local villages, famous for their textiles and wood carvings. We then head to the Maya Traditions Museum to learn about the traditional customs, music and costumes.

04/04/2017 Antigua – Lake Atitlan (BLD)

After breakfast we make the hour-long scenic drive to the charming town of Comalapa where we enjoy a tour of the local market. After lunch we continue our drive to glorious Lake Atitlan. The rest of the day is at leisure.

Hotel Atitlan

Panajachel

05/04/2017 Lake Atitlan (BLD)

The famous English writer Aldous Huxley described Lake Atitlan as “the most beautiful lake in the world”, and justifiably so. Formed by a volcanic cataclysm 84,000 years ago, the lake shimmers in a mountain valley surrounded by three lofty volcanoes. It is overlooked by a dozen

charming villages whose inhabitants proudly wear traditional dress, which distinguishes one village from the next. Today we enjoy a leisurely cruise on the glorious lake, visiting a number of these communities.

06/04/2017 Lake Atitlan – Chichicastenango – Guatemala City (BLD)

This morning we make the two-hour drive to the vibrant town of Chichicastenango. Each Thursday and Sunday the town hosts one of the largest and most colourful markets in all the Americas. Traders set up the night before and come from all over Guatemala to sell their wares. Stalls packed with stunning textiles, pottery, flowers, wooden masks and hammocks cram the narrow streets and squares and most of the traders wear the colourful, traditional national dress. The whole market exudes a vibrant atmosphere. After lunch we drive to Guatemala City.

Westin Camino Real

Guatemala City

07/04/2017 Guatemala City – Copan (BLD)

Today we make the morning drive to the Guatemala-Honduras border. Soon after crossing into Honduras, we arrive at the beautiful colonial town of Copan. After lunch at our hotel we visit the fantastic bird park of Macaw Mountain.

Marina Copan Hotel

Copan

08/04/2017 Copan (BLD)

Copan is considered by many to be one of the most spectacular centres of the Mayan world. This culture, one of the most important in Central America, flourished in the western part of Honduras. This morning we explore one of the largest and culturally lavish centres of the Mayan world. Built around the 5th Century AD, Copan, at its peak, had a population of more than 20,000.

09/04/2017 Copan – Rio Dulce (BLD)

After breakfast we cross back into Guatemala and start to head north on the main road to Tikal. By lunch time we reach our hotel at the mouth of the River Dulce as it flows from Guatemala's largest lake, Izabal.

Hotel Villa Caribe

Livingston

10/04/2017 Rio Dulce – Livingston – Tikal (BLD)

After breakfast we board our boat that takes us along the steep canyons of the Rio Dulce to Livingston. This unique town in Guatemala has a distinctly Caribbean feel and is one of the highlights of the country. Surrounded by jungle and water, boat transportation provides the only access. This is a settlement of the Garifuna people who speak their own language, as well as Spanish and English. After lunch we return to Rio Dulce and head north to Tikal.

Jungle Lodge

Tikal

11/04/2017 Tikal (BLD)

Today we visit what is widely regarded as one of the world's greatest archaeological sites, the magnificent Mayan city of Tikal. Described as the 'New York' of the Mayan civilisation, Tikal is a sprawling complex of more than 3,000 structures deep in the heart of the jungle. Huge temples rise above the forest canopy and monkeys and colourful parrots are abundant in the surrounding area. It is an amazing place to conclude our tour of Central America.

12/04/2017 Flores – Guatemala City (BLD)

This morning we transfer to the airport for our flight to Guatemala City.

Depart Flores Aviateca AV 7979, 07.35

Arrive Guatemala City 08.40

On arrival we will enjoy a tour of the city before we transfer to our hotel for our final night.

Westin Camino Real

Guatemala City

13/04/2017 Guatemala City – Panama – Los Angeles (B)

Early this morning we transfer to the airport for the flight to Los Angeles via Panama City.

Depart Guatemala City Copa Airlines CM 389, 07.10

Arrive Panama City 10.40

Depart Panama City Copa Airlines, CM 472, 11.40

Arrive Los Angeles 16.50

On arrival in Los Angeles we connect with our flight to Sydney.

Depart Los Angeles Qantas QF 12, 22.30

14/04/2017 In Flight

As we head back to Australia we cross the International Date Line.

15/04/2017 Arrive Australia

Arrive Sydney 06.30

On arrival in Sydney we connect with the flight to our chosen Australian airport.

TREASURES OF CENTRAL AMERICA

If I am coming from Perth or any other major capital city in Australia, will it be possible to overnight in Sydney before the journey to Los Angeles?

Yes. We find many of our guests choose this option. We use a good hotel at Sydney airport. Just let our consultants know if you want to take up this option and we will make the booking on your behalf.

How long is the flight from Sydney to Los Angeles?

Flying time is 13 hours and 35 minutes.

Is personal security a problem in Central America?

In most of Central America security is not a big problem. However we remind our guests of the need to take sensible precautions. These include not wearing ostentatious jewellery, not showing or counting money in public, and not going to certain areas at night. Basically it's a case of using common sense, particularly in large cities.

How much spending money do I need for the entire trip?

Because almost everything is included, we would suggest an amount of USD \$1200 per person as being ample for the whole journey. However, if you're a keen shopper and like to buy lots of gifts and souvenirs, you may require more.

Are credit cards acceptable?

Credit cards are generally acceptable for purchases throughout the tour. ATMs are available in most of Central America for cash withdrawals. However we don't recommend relying solely on these as the main source of funds – we suggest taking some cash in USD.

Do I need vaccinations for this journey?

IMPORTANT: A yellow fever vaccination is mandatory on this tour and the certificate for the injection must accompany each passenger, as, on arrival in Sydney, Australian immigration may ask to see it. In the rare case where a person cannot be given the vaccine, a certificate of waiver must be obtained. Tetanus should always be up to date and typhoid and hepatitis vaccinations are recommended. As we travel into malarial areas, a powerful insect repellent is essential and anti-malaria tablets are recommended. We suggest that you also seek advice from your doctor.

Is the water safe to drink en-route and what is the general standard of hygiene?

We err on the side of caution on all of our tours and advise travellers to drink only bottled water. This is easy to obtain everywhere. The standard of hygiene in Central America is surprisingly high along the entire route. We recommend the use of hand sanitiser before each meal and occasionally during the day, as we will be handling local money and visiting public places.

What is the climate like at this time of the year?

December to March is the dry season in Central America with temperatures typically in the low to mid 20s.

Do I need visas for Central America?

There are no visas required for this tour. However, each traveller must apply on-line for the USA Visa Waivers Program prior to travel, at <https://esta.cbp.dhs.gov/esta>. The cost is US\$14 and the visa waiver is valid for two years.

A lot of companies have many expensive optional extras on their tours. Do you?

We don't believe in a lot of expensive 'optional tours'. Our itineraries are designed to make the best possible use of time and to include all the must-see sights, plus additional surprises. Therefore practically everything is included in the tour cost.

What is the standard of hotels like on this tour?

We endeavour to use centrally located hotels throughout. The hotels on this trip are of a high standard and generally between 4 and 5 star.

What currency should I take?

The currency for this journey is US dollars. They should be in low denominations, clean and undamaged, and post-2006.

Are internet facilities available en-route?

Internet facilities are now available in Central America and some of the hotels we use have business centres with access to the internet at quite reasonable prices.

Do mobile telephones work?

Telstra and Optus mobiles work for most of the journey. You will need to ensure you have global roaming and a tri-band phone. Contact your service provider for further details.

How much should we tip the guides and porters?

There is no need to tip guides or porters as all tipping and gratuities are included in the tour cost.