

WISH YOU WERE HERE

A world of wonders

Unexpected wildlife encounters, dramatic vistas and charming colonial towns – **Neil Geraghty** finds Central America a paradise on earth

When you hear rustling in the undergrowth in El Salvador, one thing springs to mind – poisonous snakes. I'm on a morning hike to the crater of Santa Ana volcano and on the lower slopes I enter a stretch of dappled woodland. During the dry season many trees shed their foliage and the rustling sound is emanating from a pile of dry leaves. I stop dead in my tracks, my heart beating with both fear and excitement, but instead of a venomous snake, a long snuffling snout appears. It clearly belongs to a mammal and as I'm curious to find out which one, I stand rooted to the spot. Eventually a cute face appears with tiny surprised looking eyes and pointed ears. I'm none the wiser, but when its unmistakable armour-plated body is revealed I'm delighted to discover that it's an armadillo. With poor eyesight, the armadillo has no idea that I'm there and walks straight in front of me wiggling its bottom as it probes the ground for insects.

The woodland peters out and I enter an arid landscape where giant agaves send up flower spikes covered in yellow blooms several metres into the air. Eventually the vegetation disappears altogether and near the windswept summit my nostrils begin to tingle with the acrid smell of sulphurous gases. From the volcano's rim I gaze down into the crater where steam billows from a jade green lake. Turning around, I take

in the spectacular view of volcanoes stretching westwards to nearby Guatemala. In the near distance lies

Lake Coatepeque, a sapphire blue lake contained within a vast caldera. I've worked up quite a sweat during the ascent and a dip in the lake is a tempting proposition. Coatepeque is a favourite weekend destination for Salvadorans and the shoreline is dotted with pretty villages where restaurants built on wooden jetties overlook the water. The restaurants have bathing platforms and walking to the edge of one I hold my nose and take a deep plunge into the lake. The water is delightfully refreshing and its mineral rich content is a natural skin softener. I float out into the lake and

let the soft water dissolve away all the aches and pains from the strenuous hike.

From Coatepeque it's a short drive to Santa Ana, the pleasant capital of El Salvador's beautiful coffee growing region. In common with historic towns throughout Central America, the centre of Santa Ana consists of a large tree-filled plaza surrounded by elegant colonial era buildings. Dusk is an especially lovely time to visit, when friends and families go for strolls and colourful food stalls decorated with fairy lights open up. I'm keen to try some local street food and stop in front of a bright green cart to try shuco, a popular cornmeal porridge. The vat of gloopy grey liquid looks distinctly unappetising, but with

a dash of ground pumpkin seeds, puréed black beans and chilli pepper, the porridge is transformed into a hearty, appetising soup. Overlooking the plaza, a juice bar catches my eye. Central America has a mouthwatering selection of unusual tropical fruits, many of which are seasonal treats. I order zopote juice with crushed ice. Also known as the

Client: CATA Yellow News
Source: The Scotsman
Date: 20/07/2019
Page: 41
Reach: 19792
Value: 6110.88

The armadillo wiggles its bottom as it probes the ground for insects



View of Lake Coatepeque, main; rafting on the Cangregal River, above

Client: CATA Yellow News
Source: The Scotsman
Date: 20/07/2019
Page: 41
Reach: 19792
Value: 6110.88



Client: CATA Yellow News
Source: The Scotsman
Date: 20/07/2019
Page: 41
Reach: 19792
Value: 6110.88

Yellow News...

Mexican apple, zapote has a delicate peach flavour with zesty citrus overtones and for a tropical thirst quencher, is unrivalled.

From El Salvador I fly to Roatan, the largest of the Bay Islands that lies 40 miles north of the Honduran coastline and straddles the Mesoamerican reef, the second-longest barrier reef in the world. Famed for its golden beaches and world class snorkeling, one of the loveliest spots on the island is West Bay, home to the Grand Roatan Caribbean Resort where hillside villas set amidst tropical gardens overlook an idyllic sandy cove.

I'm keen to discover the reef's marine life and join a guided snorkeling tour run by the resort's diving school. It only takes a couple of minutes to swim out to the reef where the sandy sea bottom transforms into an underwater coral garden. The most common species are yellow brain corals covered in zigzag patterns and delicate purple fan corals that sway back and forth in the sea currents. Many colourful fish take refuge amongst the coral, including rainbow parrot fish, which have iridescent blue, green and purple markings that resemble underwater peacocks. The reef drops off in a dizzying coral cliff and swimming in the open sea, we're suddenly surrounded by hundreds of yellow and black striped sergeant majors. These indomitable little fish are the Hoovers of the Caribbean and descend on larger fish and turtles to clean their skin of parasites.

The Bay Islands are home to Garifuna communities, descendants of rebellious slaves who in the early 19th century were deported by the British from St Vincent. They still speak English with a lilting Caribbean accent and are famous in Honduras for their vibrant traditional music and dance. The best place to experience this is in Punta Gorda, Roatan's oldest village, which on Sunday afternoons hosts

an impromptu outdoor party where locals take it in turn to show off their dancing skills in front of a band. The rum is flowing when I arrive and two ladies in colourful Bob Marley sarongs are circling around the dance floor gyrating their hips to a frenzied drum beat. The ladies get a big round of applause but the unlikely star of the afternoon is a rather portly elderly gentleman whose frenzied belly dancing moves are met with thunderous cheers.

On a clear day in Roatan you can spot the rugged outline of Honduras' highest mountains towering majestically over the mainland's coastline. The mountains are the source of numerous rivers that tumble down the slopes in a series of rapids and waterfalls. From a wooden hut near the Cangregal River, La Moskitia Ecoaventuras, run by jungle survival expert Jorge Salaverri, offers a variety of exciting trekking, rafting and canyoning adventures in the beautiful Pico Bonito National Park. During the late dry season the Cangregal water levels drop and the current slows, making it the perfect time for canyoning, an enjoyable mixture of rock climbing, jumping into rivers and floating downriver feet first. I don a life jacket and safety helmet and follow our guide, Victor, down a jungle path to the river. Giant boulders several metres high lie on the river bed and I feel like a dwarf in a giant's playground as we clamber over them. We reach a ledge and, one by one, jump into the cool water.

Turning over onto my back I catch the current and slowly drift downstream between the giant boulders. We enter a tranquil pool and pause to soak in the jungle atmosphere. I spot a shoal of emerald fish darting through the clear water, their colours mirrored by the iridescent flashes of dragonflies skimming the surface. The air is filled with the falsetto croaks of miniature frogs, a magical soundtrack to this enchanting jungle adventure. ■

For more information on holidays in Central America, visit www.visitcentroamerica.com. Journey Latin America (0203 553 9647, www.JourneyLatinAmerica.co.uk) offers a 16-night holiday to El Salvador and Honduras visiting the highlights and with a three-night stay in Roatan. Prices start from £3,833 and include international flights from Edinburgh via London to San Salvador, breakfast, private transfers and guided excursions.

Client: CATA Yellow News
Source: The Scotsman
Date: 20/07/2019
Page: 41
Reach: 19792
Value: 6110.88



Snorkeling on the Bay Islands, Honduras