



One El of a trip

AFTER 45 minutes on a back-shattering boat ride from the Caribbean coast of Honduras, we arrived on the tiny island of Chachahuat Cay, a perfect vision of palm trees, beach and fishermen's shacks. I slid from the beached boat into the waist-deep water and joined up with my pal Russell, who was strolling through the beachside huts. Kids laze on hammocks, a dad poses with a freshly caught lobster, and a mum braids her daughter's hair in the shade, all against the backdrop of stunningly white sand and a jade sea.

There are 96 people crammed into this spit of sand about 100 metres long, their homes made from driftwood, planks and palm leaves and turned into their own paradise island.

“These are the Garifuna people, a mix of African slaves and the Carib tribes, who were deported by the British

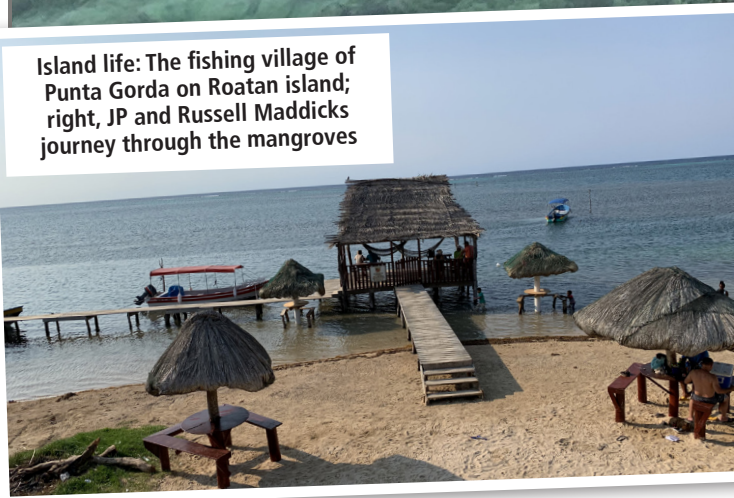
In a beachside shack, we had the speciality of fish and conch in coconut broth, and breaded shrimp...

from St Vincent 200 years ago, and set up communities all along the Caribbean coastline of Central America. They're known around the area for their love of life and fun, relaxation and friendliness — just like most of the people we met with in Central America.

Our new pal Ramon sells us lunch that day. The islanders take it in turns to feed any passing boatmen or tourists, and Ramon's wife Mildred presented us with a huge, fresh red snapper with rice and beans and salsa and beer. Ramon also showed us the communal cabin, where tourists can stay overnight at the weekend — as long as they bring their own beer for the party.

Not far away, on the largest island in the national park area of Cayo Cochinos, the Italian version of *Survivor* was being filmed. If they only knew what was so close, they'd probably swim over.

We had met the Garifuna people before



Island life: The fishing village of Punta Gorda on Roatan island; right, JP and Russell Maddicks journey through the mangroves



on the very touristy island of Roatan, famous as a stop-off point for Caribbean cruises. It's the biggest resort in Honduras, well developed for tourists and deeply forested behind its stunning beaches.

We were on a 10-day adventure trip through the Central American countries of Honduras and El Salvador, jungle trekking to volcanoes, waterfalls and whitewater rafting, so two days in Roatan was a nice break in the middle.

The fishing village of Punta Gorda is where 2,000 of the Garifuna people were first dumped in 1797, before spreading out along the coast. The direct descendants still live here, and in a beachside shack, we had their speciality of fish and conch in coconut broth, and breaded shrimp, all washed down by SalsaVida beer.

Further down, outside Perla's Restaurant, the locals had gathered for their Sunday afternoon open-air ses-

sion of music and traditional dancing. There was a mixture of Creole reggae and Afro-Caribbean drumming as the villagers stepped out and took it in turns to show off their booty wobbles and bottom shaking to the cheering crowd.

“This is not for the tourists,” shouted our guide Yovany. “They do this every Sunday, just for fun.”

During our two days on Roatan, there were no cruise ships docking. This was

lucky for us, as normally there are four or five a week disgorging up to 20,000 day trippers to the island's attractions.

Little French Cay is a beautiful private beach club island with white powder sand, and usually caters for up to 500 visitors a day with watersports and snorkelling in the huge reef system along the island.

The nearby Anthony's Key hotel and resort specialised in a touch and feel dolphin encounter, which is as near to the wild as possible as it's held not in pens, but in an enclosed bay off the sea. The dolphins are often let out and follow boats to the dive sites and swim among the divers.

Equally wild on the island is a cage which drops into the water and, bizarrely enough, houses five tigers that like to go for a dip in the sea.

The small seafront town of West End was already buzzing in mid-afternoon on the day we visited, and has an endless stream of shops, restaurants and bars. When I

was buying a souvenir cap in a shop, the woman advised me, “You don't stay here if you want to sleep at night.”

With her wise words still in my ear, we hopped into a water taxi back to the hotel, the Gran Roatan Resort, right at the very tip of the island. The reef ended right beside the resort's beach, and

“*Little French Cay is a beautiful private beach club island with white powder sand*”

the hotel dive club was able to take us snorkelling to two amazing sites just 30

JP THOMPSON embarks on an adventure in paradise, trekking, rafting and snorkelling around the Caribbean coastline of two Central America countries



Snack shack: A local vendor in the village of Izalco in El Salvador

over or avoiding the large rocks.

The whitewater rafting had us flying down the fast-flowing river, bouncing off boulders as big as caravans and paddling like mad to avoid the huge drops — a full afternoon of adrenaline soaking for \$45.

Our thrill-seeking had started first in nearby El Salvador, a small but the most densely populated country in Central America — surprising really, as a lot of the country lives in the shadow of 25 active volcanoes.

On our first morning, staff at the Barcelo Hotel shook our hands and wished us well as we headed to the largest of the country's volcanoes, the Ilamatepec, or Santa Ana, which last erupted in 2008. At 2,300 metres, it is also the highest peak in the country.

We joined a group of 30 walkers at 1,000 metres before zig-zagging our way towards the top of the crater, chaperoned by four guides and a tourist policeman, who was there in case of emergencies.

A dodgy ankle had me quickly lagging behind and young guide Alexandre Lopez fell back with me and broke off a large branch for me to use as a walking stick. At rest stops, he pointed out places in the huge landscape, like the accompanying volcanoes of Cerro Verde and Izalco and the little village of Dolores, where he said the lava once stopped right at the statue of the Madonna.

Fifty metres from the top, the other climbers were making their way down past us. We decided to join them on the descent after Russell tells me that, while the views were incredible, there was a fierce smell of sulphur and a danger of falling into the crater because of high winds.

I didn't get to see the fabled string of volcanoes in this Pacific ring of fire, or the stunning Lake Coatepeque, which was basically a huge crater filled with water. But after a walk up a volcano, I was able to swim in one when we stopped off at the lake for lunch. It's a big draw at weekends when families from the nearby capital of San Salvador flock to the many restaurants built on stilts over the water.

An ageing mariachi band were serenading us before we ate, but we decided on an



ESCAPE



Adrenaline rush: JP on the Cangrejil River in Honduras and (below), lunch with a mariachi band at Lake Coatepeque in El Salvador



impromptu dip and jumped off the wooden platform into the lake — an instant refreshment after the three-hour walk and a chance to wash off the volcanic dust.

Besides the volcanoes, the rest of the country is surprisingly verdant, with fields of sugar cane in the lower lying lands and coffee plantations higher up. And then there's La Ruta de las Flores, a popular tourist-bus attraction with a charming drive through the surrounding towns of Ataco, Juayua, Salcoatitán and Izalco, which are bursting with colour when the flowers bloom in the spring.

In Izalco, we bought mango slices from a family roadside stall in front of one of the many murals which decorate these towns. By the charming town square, there's a small museum in memory of the massacre of between 10,000 and 30,000 indigenous Mayans, who were slaughtered in 1932 when they protested against the coffee plantation owners taking their land.

On the way back, we stopped at the large town of Santa Ana to try our hand at making pupusas, the classic Salvadorean staple dish of thick tortillas. Chef Juanita at La Pradera showed us how to make the corn dough, before folding it over a

stuffing of cheese or vegetables before frying. It's served with a spicy sauce at breakfast and dinner, though strangely never at lunch.

On our last day in El Salvador, we headed to Suchitoto, a charming colonial town famed for its dazzlingly white church, and its location beside the country's biggest lake and the spectacular Los Tercios waterfall. We called into the local tourist police, where you just knock on the door

and arrange a time for a free 'escort' to the waterfall.

It's made up with huge hexagonal-shaped blocks, like a taller Giants Causeway, which can apparently get quite slippery and dangerous when wet. Sadly, it was neither dangerous nor even wet as the rain had been in short supply for our visit.

Officers Francisco, Carlos and Kelvin brought us back to their station, keen to show off the horses they use against rustlers. Francisco, the station sergeant, led out his mount Athena and let us pat her, and tells us: "We've ordered Stetsons so we can go on parade in the town square for the tourists."

Getting there

- For more information on travel to Central America, see visitcentralamerica.com
- Iberia Airlines flies daily to all countries in Central America through Madrid Airport
- The Cayo Cochinos boat tour can be booked through touristoptions.com (price \$55)
- Whitewater rafting and canyoning was with La Moskita Eco Adventures at lamoskitia.hn
- For details on the Grand Roatan Resort Hotel, see grandroatanresort.com and for the Barcelo Hotel in San Salvador, see Barcelo.com



LATE DEALS

Go East for Westlife

If you missed Westlife on the Dublin leg of their tour or want to experience the gig in the sun, you can get five nights in Dubai next month with tickets to the Irish boy band from €649pps, including flights from Dublin. Accommodation is in the 4-star Mercure Gold Hotel Al Mina Road, which boasts a rooftop swimming pool and is close to Jumeirah Beach. The boys go on stage in the Coca Cola Arena Dubai on August 29 and the flight departs August 27. Call Cassidy Travel on (01) 8901000.

India on your tod

Group holidays are ideal for lone travellers who don't want to travel alone to far-flung destinations. Luckily there's a five star solo-friendly tour of the wonders of India on October 1. The 11-day trip includes a rickshaw ride in Old Delhi, seeing the Taj Mahal at sunrise in Agra and the Amber Fort in the Pink City of Jaipur. Prices start from €1,999pp (no single supplement!) including 5-star half-board hotel accommodation, flights, transfers, and guided excursions. Call the Travel Department on (01) 6371600.



Kingdom delights

Bring your pals to The Kingdom this summer for fun and rest with a surf and spa adventure.

The Rose Hotel's new package includes two nights B&B, dinner on one evening in the Park Restaurant and a two-hour surf lesson on Banna Beach. Then follow it up with a bit of relaxation at the Serenity Spa with a 25-minute bamboo massage. It costs from €233 per person sharing and you can book by calling 066 7199100 or visit therosehotel.com.



Beach bliss

You'll get a lot for your buck in Portugal if you're planning a late week away in the sun. The Algarve has again been voted Europe's Leading Beach Destination at the World Travel Awards and Portugal is officially one of the sunniest countries in the world. At the height of the summer, visitors to the Algarve can expect temperatures of 28°C and 11 hours of sunshine daily. And in a recent survey it came second as a value-for-money holiday destination (after Bulgaria). There is a range of accommodation still available in the Algarve with Sunway offering a week at the end of July from €589 or at the end of August from €499.

