

# NORTH AMERICA: MEXICO & CENTRAL AMERICA

The seven Central American countries, south of Mexico, form a land bridge between North and South America. All but Belize and El Salvador have both Pacific and Atlantic coastlines. From mid-Mexico south, the climate is tropical, summerlike year round except at higher elevations (where most of the population lives). Mountain ranges run the length of northern Mexico (the Sierra Madre Oriental in the east, the Sierra Madre Occidental in the west) and converge to form a high volcanic chain that continues through Central America. Violent earthquakes, hurricanes, and active volcanoes threaten the region. The fertile soil was enriched by past volcanic activity. Ample rainfall and sustained warmth produce fine mountain-grown coffee. Down along the steaming coast grow bananas, the second largest crop.

Except for the English influence in Belize, the language, culture, and religion of these nations reflect 300 years of Spanish domination, beginning in the early 1500s. Franciscan friars converted the Indians to Roman Catholicism and paved the way for their absorption into Spanish life. The indigenous populations were nearly wiped out by killings, enslavement, and particularly the European diseases to which they lacked immunity. "Mestizos," people of mixed Indian and Spanish heritage, make up most of the population. The few remaining pure-blooded Indian tribes live in isolated areas.

Most of these nations became independent from Spain in the early 19th century. But nearly 200 years later, the land, wealth, and political power are still in the hands of virtually the same wealthy families (the "landed aristocracy"). The vast majority of the people are desperately poor, and many try to migrate to the United States. The US has historically regarded this region as its sphere of influence, intervening in the affairs of these countries whenever it has felt a threat to its economic interests or political security.

## MEXICO

**Area:** 761,602 sq mi (1,972,549 km<sup>2</sup>) **Population:** 86,500,000 **Capital:** Mexico City, 17,000,000 **Government:** Republic **Language:** Spanish **Religion:** Roman Catholic **Exports:** Oil, vehicles, steel, chemicals, silver, coffee, cotton, sisal, and chicle **Climate:** Temperate to tropical  Most of the world's largest Spanish-speaking population lives here, between the two Sierra Madre ranges, on a high triangular plateau. In the northwest, separated from mainland Mexico by the Gulf of California, is Baja (Lower) California, a long (800 mi., 1,280 km), narrow peninsula of mountains, deserts, and beaches. The 20th century Mexican muralist Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros have drawn heavily upon an ancient Indian muralist tradition. Long before the conquistadores destroyed the Aztecs, Mexico was home to the advanced Mayans and Toltecs, who built pyramids rivaling those in Egypt. Mexico City, the capital, is the world's largest (10,000,000), fastest growing, and smoggiest city. It was built on the site of the Aztec capital. Mexico is growing so rapidly that over half the population is under age 20. In the early 20th century, the nation had a revolution that set in place institutions for meaningful social, economic, and political reforms. Unfortunately, these measures have yet to be fully implemented as one political party has dominated Mexican politics since 1929. Mexico is mineral-rich. It is the leading producer of silver and may have the world's largest oil reserves. It is also the leading producer of sisal, a hemp fiber used in rope, and chicle, the basic ingredient of chewing gum. These substances grow in the rain forests of the low-lying Yucatan peninsula. Only 12% of Mexico is cultivated, but a wide variety of crops are grown, and produce is sold to US winter markets.

## BELIZE

**Area:** 8,860 sq mi (22,947 km<sup>2</sup>) **Population:** 175,000 **Capital:** Belmopan, 4,600 **Government:** Constitutional monarchy **Language:** English, some Spanish **Religion:** Roman Catholic, 60% Protestant, 40% **Exports:** Sugar, timber, citrus, bananas, lobsters, and shrimp **Climate:** Tropical  Located in the southeast corner of the Yucatan, Belize (beh leez'), formerly British Honduras but independent since 1981, is the only English-speaking country in this region. (Spain did not value the dense jungles and swampy coastlines.) Belmopan, the tiny capital, was placed inland for protection against hurricanes. Belize City (48,000) is an important port for tropical hardwoods (mahogany and rosewood). Half the people are black or mulatto (mixed black and white), a fifth are direct descendants of the Mayans, the remainder are mestizos, Europeans, and Asians. Though Guatemala has abandoned its claim to Belize, British troops still protect the nation's border.

## GOSTA RIGA

**Area:** 19,620 sq mi (50,816 km<sup>2</sup>) **Population:** 2,950,000 **Capital:** San José, 248,000 **Government:** Republic **Religion:** Roman Catholic **Exports:** Coffee, bananas, timber, food products, and light industry **Climate:** Tropical  Among the countries in this region, Costa Rica has the highest standard of living, the highest percentage of mestizos (97%), the highest literacy rate, the greatest percentage of small landholders, and the longest orderly succession of democratic governments. It is the only Latin American country without a standing army—and this may have insured stability, since in Latin America the military is more likely to wage war against its own government than against any invader. Located on a coffee-growing plateau are the capital, San José, and other major cities.

## EL SALVADOR

**Area:** 8,204 sq mi (21,249 km<sup>2</sup>) **Population:** 6,200,000 **Capital:** San Salvador, 465,000 **Government:** Republic **Language:** Spanish **Religion:** Roman Catholic **Exports:** Coffee, cotton, sugar, timber, textiles, and food products **Climate:** Tropical  This mountainous country is the smallest and most densely populated in the region and is the only one without an Atlantic coastline. El Salvador is more industrialized than its neighbors, but the creation of new jobs cannot keep pace with the expanding population. Most of the cities and farms are located in the central highlands region, where coffee is the principal cash crop. Over 90% of the people are mestizos, 3% are Indian, and 5% are the ruling white landowners. The enormous disparity between rich and poor has given rise to a revolutionary movement that controls many parts of the interior. The government, which has been supported by massive US aid, has been unable to defeat the rebels.

## GUATEMALA

**Area:** 42,048 sq mi (108,904 km<sup>2</sup>) **Population:** 9,350,000 **Capital:** Guatemala City, 770,000 **Government:** Republic **Language:** Spanish, many Indian dialects **Religion:** Roman Catholic **Exports:** Coffee, bananas, lumber, cotton, chicle **Climate:** Tropical  Guatemala has the largest percentage (55%) of pure-blooded Indians in the region. Most are direct descendants of the great Maya culture, which lasted for nearly 2,000 years but ended mysteriously around 900 AD. Deep in the northern lowland jungles are the ruins of Tikal, a Mayan city of stone buildings and pyramids. The Indian majority live in their ancestral villages, the country is run by the westernized, mestizo Guatemalans ("ladinos"), who are concentrated in the southern highlands. Sitting on a high plateau is the capital, Guatemala City, the largest city in Central America. It has been wrecked by three devastating earthquakes in this century; the highlands are also prone to eruptions from some of the 27 volcanoes. For the past 30 years, a succession of military governments has waged a low level war against guerrilla forces protesting the inequitable ownership of land. A civilian President was elected in 1986 but the war and

the abuse of human rights continue. A third of Guatemalans have been converted to Protestantism by American evangelists. The Catholic Church in Latin America has been accused of being too sympathetic to the plight of the poor, and in countries with left-wing movements, the church has often been the target of the military. Evangelicals challenging Catholicism throughout Latin America have had the most success in Guatemala, which was formerly ruled by a military leader who became a "born-again Christian."

## HONDURAS

**Area:** 43,270 sq mi (109,479 km<sup>2</sup>) **Population:** 5,000,000 **Capital:** Tegucigalpa, 310,000 **Government:** Republic **Language:** Spanish **Religion:** Roman Catholic **Exports:** Bananas, coffee, timber, minerals, and cattle **Climate:** Tropical  If any Latin American country deserves the name "banana republic," it is Honduras, the poorest country in the region. Huge, mostly American-owned plantations are located on the fertile and humid Caribbean coast. Here, the nation's only railroads are used for hauling bananas to coastal ports. Honduras, with large unplanted areas of cultivable land and large reserves of untapped mineral deposits, has significant economic potential. Tegucigalpa, the capital, is located in the mountains.

## NICARAGUA

**Area:** 57,440 sq mi (148,770 km<sup>2</sup>) **Population:** 3,650,000 **Capital:** Managua, 680,000 **Government:** Republic **Language:** Spanish **Religion:** Roman Catholic **Exports:** Coffee, cotton, coffee, sugar, bananas, and meat **Climate:** Tropical  The largest country in Central America is triangular and made up of three distinct regions: the Mosquito Coast of swamps and rain forests, the mountains of the central highlands, and the fertile, hilly Pacific region, which holds Central America's largest lake, Lake Nicaragua. The lake is home to the world's only freshwater sharks, which evolved from sharks which were trapped when a volcanic eruption sealed off their bay from the ocean. The Pacific region holds the capital, Managua, the major cities, and the most productive farms. Managua was destroyed by earthquakes twice in this century. The population of Nicaragua is 85% mestizo, 10% mulatto, and 5% Indian. The Miskito Indians are mixed-blooded descendants of black slaves brought to Nicaragua during the early British rule of the Caribbean coast in 1979, after 30 years of repression. Anastasio Somoza was overthrown by the left-wing Sandinista party. Fearing a communist foothold on the continent, the United States organized a band of "Contras" to wage war against the Sandinistas. Though the rebels could not gain popular support, 10 years of war so weakened the economy that the Sandinistas yielded to US demands for free elections. In 1990, Violeta Chamorro led a coalition party to victory over the Sandinistas.

## PANAMA

**Area:** 29,206 sq mi (75,641 km<sup>2</sup>) **Population:** 2,350,000 **Capital:** Panama City, 471,000 **Government:** Republic **Language:** Spanish **Religion:** Roman Catholic **Exports:** Bananas, coffee, mahogany, and shrimp **Climate:** Tropical  An average of 33 ships a day pass through the Panama Canal, earning Panama the title "crossroads of the world." Through this natural gap in the mountains, the Spanish used mules to pack Inca gold brought up from the west coast of South America. The United States helped create the nation of Panama as well as the canal. In 1903, Panama, with American support, asserted its independence from Colombia, which was opposed to the Canal. The US built canal, 50 mi (80 km) long, was opened in 1914. In 1979, the US agreed to give Panama control of the Canal Zone, a strip 10 mi (16 km) wide that crosses the isthmus. The US is to relinquish control of the canal in 1999. Most Panamanians live and work in the Canal Zone. Panama City is on the Pacific Coast (78,200) on the Caribbean. In the late 1980s, the US began using economic sanctions to pressure Panama to depose its dictator, General Manuel Noriega. In 1989, the US invaded Panama on the grounds that the lives of American citizens and the operation of the canal were in danger. Noriega was taken to the US to stand trial for drug dealing.