





# 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: summery 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 and the Sierra Madre Occidental in the west converge to form a high volcanic chain that continues through Central America. Violent earthquakes, hurricanes, and active volcanoes threaten the region. Past volcanic activity has enriched the soil, which with ample rainfall and consistent warmth produces fine mountain-grown coffee; down on the steaming coast grow bananas, the region's 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 for 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. Nearly 200 years later, the land, wealth, and political power are almost all still in the hands of the same wealthy families (the "landed aristocracy"), while the vast majority are desperately poor. The U.S. 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: 103,000,000. Capital: Mexico City, 10,000,000. Government: Republic. Language: Spanish. Religion: Roman Catholic. Exports: Oil, vehicles, steel, chemicals, silver, coffee, cotton, sisal, chicle. Climate: Temperate to tropical. ☐ Most of the world's largest Spanish-speaking population live 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. Mexico's large mestizo population (70%) is very proud of its Indian heritage. The 20th-century Mexican muralists Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros have drawn heavily upon the 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's metropolitan area (21,000,000) is among the world's largest, fastest growing, and smoggiest. It was built on the site of the Aztec capital. Mexico is growing so rapidly that over half the population is under the age of 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. The 1990s have seen economic collapse and recovery, armed insurrection, and signs of political reform. Mineral-rich Mexico is the leading producer of silver; it 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—substances that grow in the rainforests of the Yucatan peninsula. Only 12% of Mexico is cultivated, but a wide variety of crops are grown; much produce is sold to U.S. winter markets.

## BELIZE

Area: 8,860 sq.mi.(22,947 km<sup>2</sup>). Population: 234,000. Capital: Belmopan, 4,700. Government: Constitutional monarchy. Language: English; some Spanish. Religion: Roman Catholic 60%; Protestant 40%. Exports: Sugar, timber, citrus, bananas, seafood. Climate: Tropical. ☐ In the southeast corner of the Yucatan, Belize (beh leez'), formerly British Honduras, is the only English-speaking country in this region; Spain did not value its dense jungles and swampy coastlines. Belmopan, the tiny capital, was placed inland for protection against hurricanes. Belize City (50,000) 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. Tensions have eased since Guatemala ceased laying claim to Belize.

## COSTA RICA

Area: 19,620 sq.mi.(50,816 km<sup>2</sup>). Population: 3,850,000. Capital: San José, 330,000. Government: Republic. Religion: Roman Catholic. Exports: Coffee, bananas, timber, food products. Climate: tropical. ☐ Costa Rica has the region's 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, a factor that may be responsible for its stability, since the chief threat to democracy in Latin America is usually the military. The nation occupies the western third of the Isthmus of Panama and lies on a plateau that is ideal for growing coffee.

## EL SALVADOR

Area: 8,204 sq.mi.(21,249 km<sup>2</sup>). Population: 6,260,000. Capital: San Salvador, 465,000. Government: Republic. Language: Spanish. Religion: Roman Catholic. Exports: Coffee, cotton, sugar, timber, textiles, foodstuffs. Climate: Tropical. ☐ This mountainous country is the smallest and most densely populated in the region, and 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 mestizo, 3% are Indian, and 5% are the white, ruling land-owners. The great disparity between rich and poor created a revolutionary movement that controlled many parts of the interior. A peace treaty was signed in 1992, formally ending the 12-year civil war.

## GUATEMALA

Area: 42,048 sq.mi.(108,904 km<sup>2</sup>). Population: 13,600,000. Capital: Guatemala City, 1,250,000. Government: Republic. Language: Spanish; many Indian dialects. Religion: Roman Catholic; Protestant. Exports: Coffee, bananas, timber, cotton, chicle. Climate: Tropical. ☐ Guatemala has the largest percentage (55%) of pure-blooded Indians in the region. Most are direct descendants of the great Mayan culture, which lasted nearly 2,000 years and ended mysteriously around 900 AD. Deep in the northern lowland jungles are the ruins of Tikal, a Mayan city of stone buildings and pyramids. Today, Indians live in their ancestral villages while 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 three times in this century by devastating earthquakes; the highlands are also subject to eruptions from some of the 27 volcanoes. For the past 30 years, a series of military governments has waged a low-level war against guerrilla forces protesting the inequitable ownership of land. Despite the election of a civilian President, the violence continues. A third of the Guate-

malans have been converted to Protestantism by American evangelists. The Catholic Church in Latin America has been accused of being too sympathetic to the poor, and in countries with left-wing movements, the church has been a target of the military. Evangelicals in Latin America have been most successful in Guatemala, where a former military leader became a "born-again" Christian.

## HONDURAS

Area: 43,270 sq.mi.(109,479 km<sup>2</sup>). Population: 6,700,000. Capital: Tegucigalpa, 1,000,000. Government: Republic. Language: Spanish. Religion: Roman Catholic. Exports: Bananas, coffee, timber, minerals, cattle. Climate: Tropical. ☐ If any Latin American country deserves the title "Banana Republic," it is Honduras, the poorest country in the region. Very large, 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, began as a rich silver-mining town in the mountains.

## NICARAGUA

Area: 57,440 sq. mi.(148,770 km<sup>2</sup>). Population: 5,900,000. Capital: Managua, 700,000. Government: Republic. Language: Spanish. Religion: Roman Catholic. Exports: Coffee, cotton, coffee, sugar, bananas, meat. Climate: Tropical. ☐ The largest country in Central America is triangular and has three distinct regions: the Mosquito Coast of swamps and rainforests; 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 that were trapped when a volcanic eruption sealed off their bay from the ocean. The capital, Managua, the major cities, and the most productive farms are located in the Pacific region. 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 U.S. organized a band of "Contras" to wage war against the Sandinistas. Though the rebels could not gain popular support, 10 years of war forced the Sandinistas to yield to U.S. demands for free elections. In 1990, a coalition party defeated the Sandinistas.

## PANAMA

Area: 29,205 sq.mi.(75,641 km<sup>2</sup>). Population: 2,900,000. Capital: Panama City, 630,000. Government: Republic. Language: Spanish. Religion: Roman Catholic. Exports: Bananas, coffee, mahogany, shrimp. Climate: Tropical. ☐ On average, 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 U.S. 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 U.S.-built canal, 50 mi.(80 km) long, was opened in 1914. In 1979, the U.S. agreed to give Panama control of the Canal Zone, a strip 10 mi.(16 km) wide that crosses the isthmus. The U.S. relinquished control of the canal in 1999. Most Panamanians live and work in the Canal Zone. Panama City is on the Pacific end, Colón (140,000) is on the Caribbean. In the late 1980s, the U.S. pressured Panama to overthrow General Manuel Noriega, who had seized power and threatened U.S. interests. In 1989, the U.S. invaded Panama and brought Noriega back to Miami, where he was convicted of drug-running and imprisoned in the U.S.