

FIRE MOUNTAIN



Central America remains uncharted territory for many travellers, but the awe-inspiring landscapes of El Salvador and Nicaragua are crying out to be explored, says **Caroline Phillips**

All the best trips involve the possibility of dying. The first time this occurs to me is when three soldiers cock their rifles at us outside our hotel in Ataco, El Salvador. (It transpires that the hotel is opposite an army communications mast.) On another occasion, we're accompanied on a sightseeing trip to Conchagua volcano by two policemen with guns: a precaution because machete-wielding locals once mugged some tourists.

Then there's the time an armed policeman shadows us in an historic graveyard in San Salvador. "In case gangs follow us in," explains our guide, Eduardo Ariaza. Plus, security guards are all armed and there are signs outside some buildings that read, 'guns prohibited inside'.

So is this a good place for a holiday? "El Salvador," notes our guidebook, "has

a reputation for guns, gangs and danger which, while not unfounded, is no longer a problem in areas frequented by most tourists." Indeed, apart from the above, we feel safe, nothing untoward happens and the country is certainly appealing for those who want an adventurous trip.

El Salvador is Central America's least-visited nation. Aside from gang violence, it's known for its vicious civil war back in the 1980s. But it should also be renowned for beaches that stretch beyond eternity,

galaxy-class surf, volcanoes, rare wildlife, colonial cities, and amazing forest reserves. The country has long tried to gain tourists' trust and now, maybe, its moment is coming.

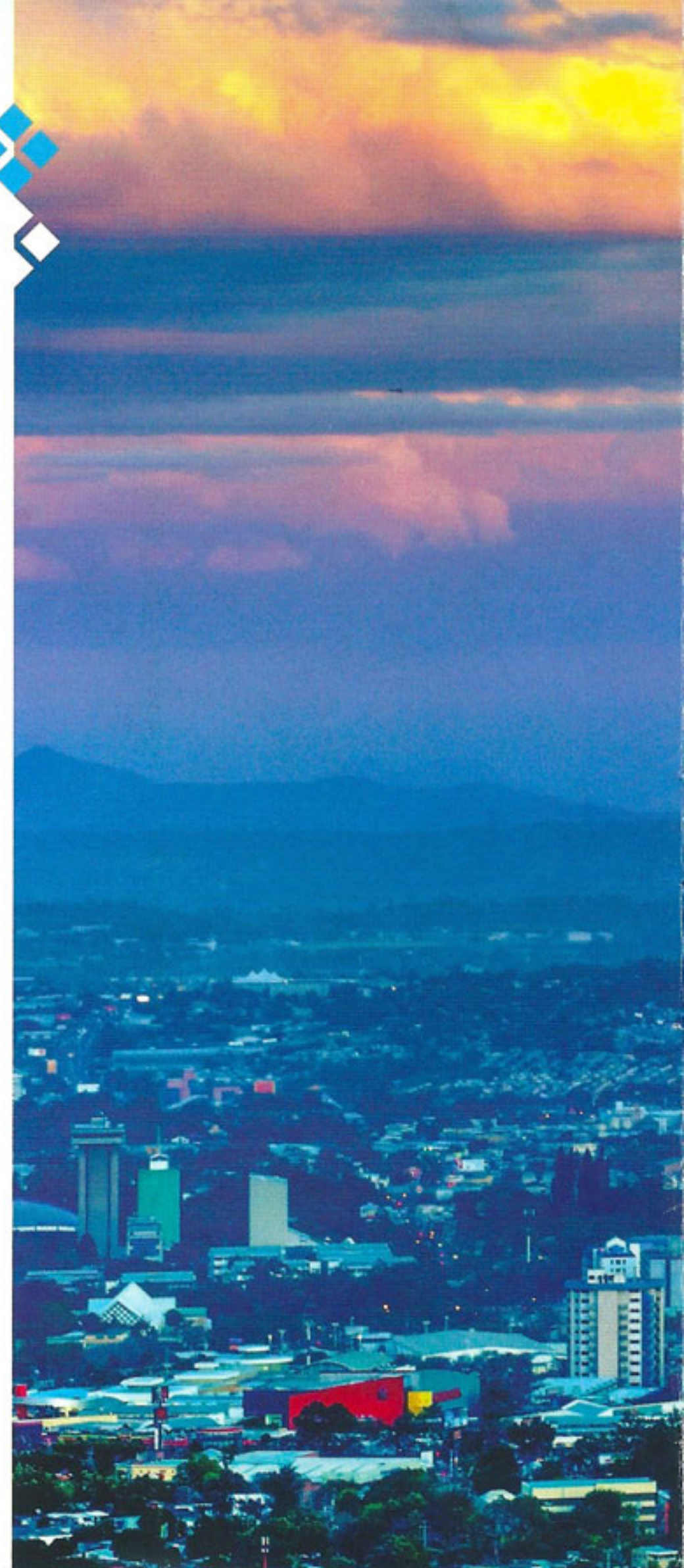
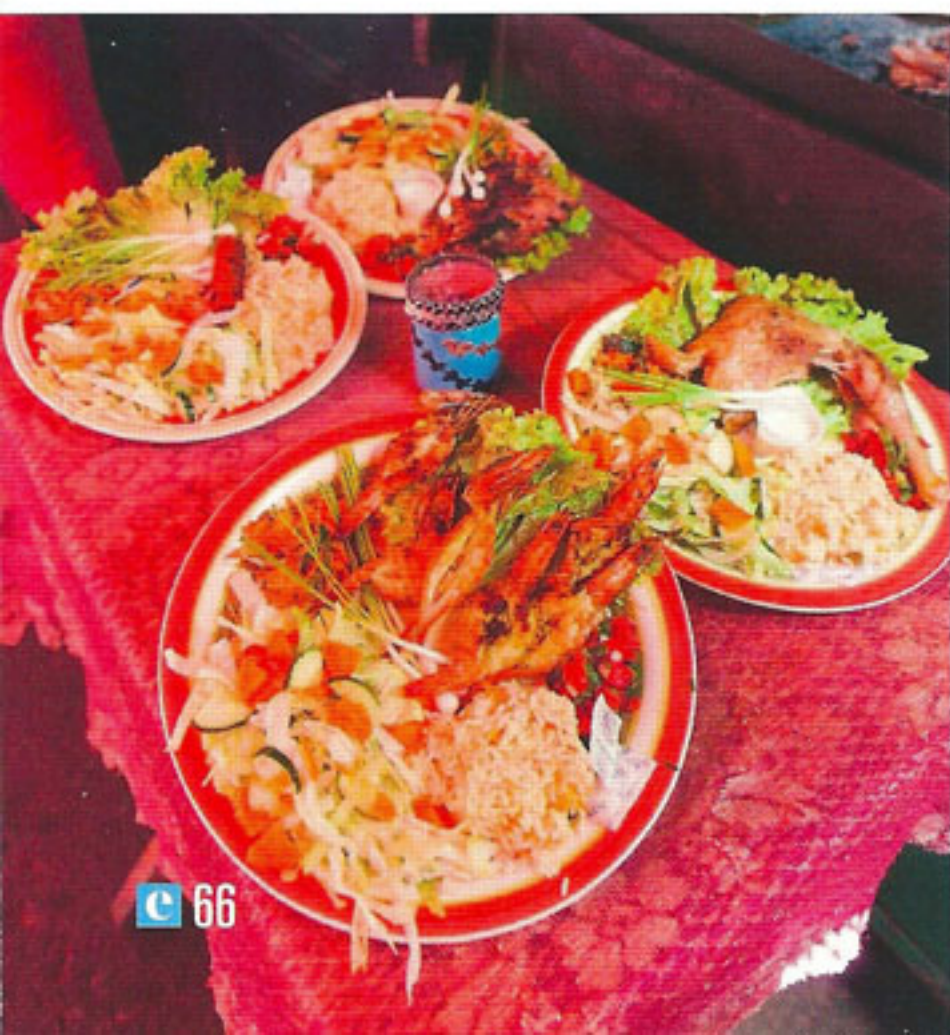
A highlight is our drive on the **Ruta de las Flores** – 'the flower route', through colourful colonial towns – which ends in Juayua. Founded in 1525, it's crammed with traditional adobe houses. As it's the weekend, there's also booming al fresco Latin American music, hawkers selling pistachios, and vendors with woven baskets containing candy on their heads; plus a photogenic, live, yellow python. "\$1 for a photo," requests its owner in Spanish, as he wraps it around my daughter's neck. (We don't meet anyone aside from our guide in El Salvador who speaks English.)

Juayua is famed for its weekend *feria gastronómica* (food fair) and there are lots of outdoor grills: for lunch, there's chargrilled iguana, guinea pig or snake – or rabbit, for the more conservative. Plus rice and beans – a staple of the Salvadorans' diet. "See that handsome fellow," points our guide. "That's frog." It's all eaten in a makeshift restaurant: plastic chairs at plastic tables under a plastic canopy.

We drive, via El Imposible National Park, to colonial Suchitoto – which means 'birds and flowers' in Nahuatl. Here we discover a place that comes from the pages of Gabriel García Márquez. There are cobblestones, and the Iglesia Santa Lucía, a 19th-century church in which pigeons pay their dues; low-rise houses in sky blue, pistachio and lemon with red clay-tiled roofs; and a women's cooperative where they still practise the traditional art of dying with indigo. After the war, the town was largely resettled by ex-guerrillas.

"During the 1980s Suchitoto was the scene of heavy fighting," says Jose Rene

The Ruta de las Flores is a 36km road that gets its name from the colourful flowers that line it. Visit from October to February when they're in full bloom.



EL SALVADOR HAS ENDLESS BEACHES, COLONIAL CITIES AND RARE WILDLIFE

Photographs (main) by Getty/John Coletti; (right) Getty/Stefano Ember; (left-top) Alamy/Vespasian; (left-bottom) Alamy/Thornton Cohen

▀ We board a wooden boat at the water's edge, disturbing a grey heron from his lake-to-plate activities. As we chug closer to an islet, the sky turns brown and quacking: dark with ducks. A snowy egret hides in the reeds, while in the trees are thousands of turkey vultures, grey herons and egrets.

The Gulf of Fonseca has a coastline that's 261km long, and it includes sand beaches, mangrove swamps and rock cliffs. No reports of any piers or arcades though, sadly...

Making a splash

There's something Conrad-esque about crossing the **Gulf of Fonseca** to Potosi, Nicaragua. "So much better than the Pan American highway,

where the police stop you under any pretext to get bribes," reveals Benjamin Melara, our guide. The gulf has a vast, painterly sky. In unhappier times, Salvadorans crossed here to flee the civil war. Now we're travelling in a modified fishing boat. "It's known as 'the limo' because it has plastic padded seats," divulges the captain. It's also backbreaking as we smash over waves, the spray soaking us as we pass little green islands that look like lazy crocodiles emerging out of the sea. There are stingrays just under the water's surface; but the dolphins have gone further out: it's too choppy. Meanwhile, brown pelicans soar over the waves dive-bombing for fish. There are volcanoes in the distance.

We arrive in Nicaragua like pirates or illegal immigrants, crashing over more



waves, dropping anchor on a deserted black volcanic beach, wading through the water barefoot and with our suitcases carried by porters on their heads, and then going up to a little hut that is the immigration office. There's a whiff of salted fish that's being loaded onto a lorry. "Not the most fancy border ever built," reveals Benjamin. Yet this must go down in history as the best arrival in a country. Ever.

Nicaragua is the largest nation in Central America, but one of the least visited. It's also the safest. So forget Sandinistas, the civil war and the Iran-Contra scandal. Years of revolution and natural disasters may have disposed of museums, galleries and theatres – and there are almost no ancient monuments – but it's the size of England and 17% of its land is nature reserves. Plus it boasts 7% of the world's biodiversity.

It offers 'ooh, ah' landscapes and 25 volcanoes; lakes, mountains and vast rainforests, tropical forests and cloud forests full of tropical wildlife. Surfing on lost beaches. The beautiful highland colonial cities of Granada and Leon. The large freshwater sea, Lago de Nicaragua, with its **sharks**. Little wonder Nicaragua has become such a hot destination – with a year-on-year growth of 7% in tourism.

Like sharks? Lake Nicaragua has plenty of them, and it's recently been discovered they can 'jump' up rivers. Just like salmon. But, um, slightly more intimidating.

It's definitely worth visiting before the shipping canal (being built by the Chinese and destined for completion in 2020) carves the country in two and transforms

THERE'S AN OX CART TRAFFIC JAM ON OUR WAY TO GO ASHBOARDING DOWN THE VOLCANO

the environment; before the sight of ospreys and kingfishers is superseded by super-tankers on the horizon.

Top billing in Nicaragua – for adrenaline junkies – goes to ashboarding down Cerro Negro volcano. A Central-American torture? No, ashboarding is like snowboarding – but on ash. There's an ox cart traffic jam on the dusty road on our way to it. Once there, we sign the waiver for dismemberment and death – our guide, Juan Carlos Mendoza, ▀

ABOVE: A boat ride on the Gulf of Fonseca ensures an adrenaline-fuelled arrival in Nicaragua. BELOW: Forget waves, boarding on ash is where it's at in this part of the world



MY HEART IS BEATING IN MY MOUTH, EARS, NOSE AND TOES AS I SET OFF DOWN THE SLOPE

was on the nearby Santiago crater in 2001 when it burped a 200lb rock onto his van – and set to climbing the coal-black, 2,395ft volcano. “According to volcanologists and geologists it’s like Mars in its atmosphere and material,” explains Juan Carlos. “Scientists came to check the crater for microorganisms to see if there’s life on Mars.” It’s also like walking up a giant pumice stone in an oven, against a gusty

wind that occasionally carries the eggy smell of sulphur. Plus, the ground is hot enough to melt your boots.

Once at the top, we feel super smug and exhilarated as only folk who have hiked a volcano can; and we drink in the better-than-heaven’s view of 15 volcanoes and the Pacific in the distance. If this were the first world, there would be signs and protective fencing around the crater – but, thrillingly, there’s nothing. Plus we’re in the middle of a 45-mile, non-stop chain of **volcanoes**, the Cordillera de los Maribios. The silence, solitude and scenery are superb.

Nicaragua is often referred to as the ‘country of volcanoes’. As well as climbing up them and boarding down, you can swim in the craters (of the dormant ones...).

We put on (very fetching) protective grey boiler suits, goggles and gloves, and look ready to deal with any forensic emergencies that may arise. After a quick lesson in ashboarding (lean back to go faster; dig your feet into the ash to brake; steer with the rope), my heart is beating in my mouth, ears, nose and toes. I’m a wuss about heights. I hate being out of control. Bravely I set off down the slope – with fine ash filling my nostrils, bra and socks. I’d love to say that I outstrip French athlete Eric Barone who got up to a speed of 107mph careering down here on his bicycle (and broke most of his ribs). But let’s just say that Juan Carlos beats me to

GETTING THERE

Journey Latin America (journeylatinamerica.co.uk) specialises in tailor-made travel to all of Latin America, including Nicaragua and El Salvador. A 15-night itinerary costs from £3,590pp including B&B, some meals, excursions, transfers and flights from London. United Airlines offers three daily non-stop services from London Heathrow to Houston, with onward connections to El Salvador and Nicaragua (united.com)

the bottom – and he’s walking.

Now, to our final destinations. How to choose between Granada and León, the finest of the highland cities, with their colonial majesty? Which place to highlight? The case for Granada: Nicaragua’s oldest colonial city, it was founded in 1524; stands at the foot of Mombacho volcano on the shore of Lago de Nicaragua; was once Central America’s jewel, boasts its oldest church (Convent y Museo San Francisco); plus it has horses and carriages and, pastel colonial buildings. It’s the sort of place Central American dreams are made of.

But my favourite is León for its street life. It’s there, the capital and ecclesiastical centre for most of colonial times, that I sit for hours on the plaza by the Bishop’s Palace, overlooking Central America’s largest cathedral, **Basilica de la Asuncion**, a baroque masterpiece. Sit on a bench by the market stalls that sell dining utensils made from gourd, coconut husk bracelets and

There’s a network of underground tunnels that connect the Basilica de la Asuncion with other temples that were once used as hideouts during attacks by pirates.

wicker baskets. And listen to the bells of the ice cream seller vying with the bells of the cathedral and the calls of the candy floss sellers. León is liberal – it remains a Sandanista heartland

– and has a buzz and political energy. And who could fail to love a city close to a dozen volcanoes and at the foot of one named Momotombo? I leave my heart in León. In fact, I leave my heart in Nicaragua and El Salvador. As Gabriel García Márquez wrote: “There is always something left to love.” **e**

BELOW: Overlooked by a dozen volcanoes, León is a must-visit for travellers in search of a true taste of Nicaragua. Not only are there buzzing markets, there’s Central America’s largest cathedral – Basilica de la Asuncion

